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"Kill me!" she gasped. "Don't let him get his hands on me!"

FLIGHT INTO FURY

By JOEL ROGERS

Kugelmann's Invincibles were a gray tide surging on Paris and Max Pavian's Tornado stormed the skies, driving green, untried Yanks like leaves before them. Yet into all this tore that fighting cowboy-marine, Sergeant Okie Crow, determined to snatch France's loveliest spy from a hideous fate!

DOWN through the dusky twilight sky the green DeHaviland 9 went streaking like a wild lost loon in desperate flight toward the rolling floor of cloud below. Down with howling club and screaming wires. Showing the American cocardes, its number K-33, the Seahorse and Mermaid insigne of Major Orlando Graunt's 10th U. S. Marine Combat upon its tail as it dived for life.

Whoom! Down! Tail turned vertical to the pale twilight stars. Spitting Liberty hitting on nine cylinders only and revving up a wild chunking 1300 r.p.m. with a noise like the mother of all boiler

factories. Inky Norman at the stick in the front cockpit was heading her, white-faced, for the great gray twilight floor below. Grinning with tight lips, chewing a bite of tobacco leaf between hard slow jaws, in the rear gunner's cockpit Okie Crow faced backward, crouching swinging the swivel-mount of his jammed Lewis gun threateningly, throwing the air-stripped barrel back over their streaking tail at the three smoke-gray Albatross one-seaters which were hurtling down the sky after him five hundred feet behind.

He aimed carefully at the first one.

"Bang!" he yelled. "Rackety-racket!



"That's right! Duck, you devils!"

He laughed with a stifled heart, frightened and breathlessly, as the diving smoky ghosts veered in their plunging headlong dive like leaves blown by an autumn blast, zoomed hastily, and then came around on keeling wings to the attack again, with fury but with caution.

Okie Crow began frantically to hammer at the block of his jammed Lewis. But it was more than a mashed cartridge to be ejected. The whole spring mechanism had uncoiled, and he would have to disassemble it. He jerked and snapped at it with strong frantic hands while the trio of gray German one-seaters, realizing at last that he was jammed, came hurtling furiously down the air trail after, with yelling Benzes revving up 1800 and eat-

ing down the sky like fire. Damp cloud blurred across Okie's goggles in an instant more, and then he and Inky were in the blanket, and everything was blind.

The cockpit floor careened beneath him as Inky leveled out with whining wings. They were rocking and growling through the gray dampness, while Inky nursed the sputtering motor south toward the lines.

"Hurt, Ink?" Okie cried, digging a sun-burned hand into the tall black-eyed pilot's shoulder.

Inky Norman shook his head. He held up his right hand. It was all soaked with red through the handkerchief which he had hastily wrapped around it, and there was a queer look in the way the ring and little fingers were folded underneath. His face was white, knotted with lines of pain, but

he could hold the hand steady. He leaned his head back toward Okie.

"Just a smear, Oklahoma!" he shouted faintly. "The same burst that smashed my gun! Got it on the gun trip. But not the old stick hand!"

"Good!" howled Okie. "Glory-hopping bunch of clowns. They weren't Pavian's Fokkers by a jugful, or a gun bluff wouldn't have held them off like that!"

Still, those three remaining ghost-gray ships knew that he was jammed now. They would be following. Above the cloud and through it. All the way to the lines.

NINE thousand feet high, Okie saw, peering at the altimeter over Inky's shoulder. Tachometer revving up a bare 1150. No more than holding themselves in the air, with heavy nose and swaying wings. Growling through the blind cloud. Trying to find their way home.

Gray cloud. They were sinking lower on logy wings, with that coughing nose-heavy Liberty. Chewing grimly, swearing with tight lips, Okie was working on his jammed gun. His fingernails were torn. His hands seemed clumsy and slow, though he was disassembling it at top speed, he knew. The dreadful roaring seconds passed. Somewhere ahead of them there lay the American lines upon the Marne, and the safety of the American A. A. barrage there, if they met no more racketing Albatrosses before he cleared his gun.

He had it disassembled in six seconds, which was fast work for the air. But the recoil pin was broken, he found. Beyond any temporary repair. He would rattle off no more messages with the old typewriter this hop.

"It's all on you, Ink!" he prayed.

The thick blind sea of cloud was thinning out. They were tearing out again into a hollow cavern of silver twilight sky, between cloud mountains, and not more than a mile and a half up.

Okie swung his thick muscular body around in the swivel ring, glancing with quick and stony eyes at the three ghost shapes zipping out of the cloud above. The gray Albatrosses had followed them, and knew that his gun was jammed. They couldn't be bluffed off now. And to the

right—

"Dive!" Okie yelled. "Albatrosses and Fokkers! It's the Tornadoes! They've been laying for us!"

Out of the corner of his paralyzed eyeballs, beneath his jutting yellow brows, he had glimpsed the bright orange wings and the red engine heads coming at them across the sky. Five of them! A patrol of Pavian's dreadful Fokkers, turning steep on bent wings not three hundred feet away to throw them into sight. As the tracers of the first guns smoked and the *tac-tac* sounded thin and dry toward them, again Okie felt the smoke of clouds rolling across his goggles. Again they were in another layer of the great twilight cloud mountains, and just in time.

Down through the billowing damp grayness on whistling wings, slicing around to change direction. Inky had cut the coughing engine off. Above them in the singing silence they heard those fierce ships roaring. Inky opened up the Liberty again with a coughing bellow, circling, heading west, then north, then back south again by compass.

"Are we making it, Ink?" yelled Okie.

Inky Norman shrugged. The blood was drained from his lean handsome face. He leaned his head back, shouting from the corner of his mouth.

"Better get rid of that code you picked up from Jacqueline! Just in case!"

"It's rammed into my Colt barrel, Ink!" the blond young gunner yelled back with a grin. "And it goes out with the first slug I fire if we're grounded!"

They had lost the ghost-gray Albatrosses. But above them a thousand feet, and to the south, between them and the lines, there were those five fire-bright Fokkers still, singing across the sky in a tight fan! The higher air was silver where they were. Against it they stood out clear, with black-crossed wings and great black numbers spread. The Fokkers must have seen the lost Marine ship almost at the same instant that it broke into the clear and saw them. Like the movement of five cards in a hand they heeled on flashing wings. They came slicing down the screaming sky, with the blue and violet streak of hurtling exhausts. From five hundred feet away Okie

could read the numbers on their tail and beneath their wings.

At their head the great black V of Pavian! The great Tornado captain's own famous and dreadful ship, his own patrol!

Okie reached for his Colt frantically, but he had dropped it. Had dropped it to the floor when he had meant last to insert it in his holster, after hammering at his Lewis gun. He sprawled in his webbed belt as Inky Norman heaved them up and over in a wild thumping half loop, half roll, to throw off those Maxims which had begun to smoke. The Colt had slid back toward the rear of Okie's cockpit out of reach. He heard the Maxim racket crash across his cockpit rim, where his head had been an instant ago, and leather and horse-hair stuffing were flying all about his shoulders.

Tac-tac-tac!

They whirled over in a thumping spin. The air rushed around Okie in a tight blind whirl up beyond the circle of his flundered cockpit rim. And still, squatting in the floor, with desperate fingers he tried to reach his Colt, but he couldn't get his fingers on it. It slid back and back, out of reach.

"Ink!" he shouted.

Whirling air. They were going down like a cyclone. Twilight sky, clouds, pale stars, sliver of moon, were whirling away from them like water down a wash-basin. Clutching his smashed rim, Okie lifted his head. In the front cockpit Inky Norman lay with his head and arms flung out upside, swinging crazily as the ship rocketed toward earth. He had been hit, he had been hit, he was dead! thought Okie. They were going to a smash like holy sixty.

The last of the old timers, the last of Bean's old Combat 10th, he and Inky. Well, there would be no tears shed by the Huns for their passing, and not too many by the youngsters of their squadron, either, or by their skipper, Orlando Graunt. Only Okie didn't want their going to bring exposure and death to the lovely blonde young French spy behind the German lines whom they had today contacted. His heavy .45 had slid back across the floor within reach of his fingers now, in the jerks of their wild head-long whirl. He

braced it across the flundered rim of his cockpit, and fired it at the orange streaks zipping exultantly past them in the sky.

"Take that!" he yelled. "And see if you can read it!"

He reached desperately for the emergency stick. Inky was out complete. He must try to get it inserted, level out their whirling wings before they spread themselves over half an acre. He didn't want them to catch him alive. But he didn't want to die like that. He would rather go out on his feet, with a gun in his hand!

II

THEIR last war drome lay pitched back of the Marne, back of Chateau-Thierry. The remnants of the 10th U. S. Marines, Major Whistleberry Bean's old Seahorses from Fuminix. They whom Pavian's great Fokker Tornado had burned and ganged in the air, had strafed and racketed on the ground, for terrible weeks unendingly. They who had once been a green young squadron, without name or importance, frightened and un-battle-tried, but who now had the roster of their victories and their many dead to give them pride and spur them on to high enterprise. Flaunting their green fuselages, their looping orange wings still, and the Seahorse and Mermaid insigne on their bullet-patched sides which had become a danger sign to every Hun which flew.

A line of camouflaged hangar tents. A cluster of hastily erected shacks and sheds with iron roofs over which at night the Gothas sang. A strip of wheel-worn meadow grass, shaking with the thunder of the guns, from which their patrols of battle-dirty two seaters went roaring up from before dawn light to after dusk with the loud song of Liberties.

Overwhelmed, cut off, and almost completely wiped out at their first drome at Fuminix in quiet Lorraine, before they had finished their battle training, by the advance of Kugelmann's great shock divisions in that terrible and almighty German drive of June, '18. Sent kiting back from Bar-le-Duc, those few who were left of them, and from their brief field at Epernay, while Pavian swept the skies as the

flying spearhead of Kugelmann's advance, and the gray tide rolled on. Reorganized, re-equipped, re-officered, their casualties constantly replaced by double the number of keen and eager young acrobatic-school pilots and gunners from overseas, and beginning presently to hit back at the Hun, growing stronger, more confident, more experienced, as they were moved back from Epernay to Nussy, to Plandeau, to this last field of theirs behind Chateau-Thierry at Lourton-val.

Fighting the Hun in the sky tooth and claw, and day by day learning to give as much as they were given. Building up a dangerous name for themselves, the once nameless green old 10th of Whistleberry Bean's which had become the Fighting Seahorses of Orlando Graunt's. Yet driven out of drome after drome, and always back, as the raw Yankee divisions which had been hastily and desperately thrown in against Kugelmann fell back along with the battle-weary French in that fierce and irresistible Hun push. Outres, which had once been far behind the lines, was Kugelmann's headquarters now. Pavian's Tornado was nested at their old drome at Fuminix, upon that blood-bought field. Confused khaki and forest-green and horizon-blue lines, crowding, pushed and slogging backward, a melange of grim dough-boy and leatherneck regulars, National Guards, French reserves, and draft divisions pouring in from Brest, still seasick from their crowded transports.

And all the time against them the great gray tide rolling onward, irresistibly! Kugelmann upon the march with all his million trained and veteran Guards! Upon the march, upon the march to Paris!

Pushed back to the Marne now, infantry, guns, and air, doughboys and marines, old grizzled veterans of a dozen spiggoty and Filipino campaigns and frightened boys fresh out of school. Here they must make their stand. They could retreat no farther. Here at the Marne they must hold the Hun, or die to the last man.

Chateau-Thierry — America's Verdun! They shall not pass, the only words they knew.

Major Orlando Graunt's Seahorse 10th holding the sky there, at Lourton-val, upon

that shaky front-line tarmac, almost within range of the advancing German howitzers, and in front of their own railway-mounted naval guns.

"THEY won't take us as they took poor old Bean's field at Fuminix, I promise you that, Colonel Artzybasheff!" said Orlando Graunt grimly. "We've got plenty guns. And we've got men and ships that can fly now, not like Bean's bunch of original half-wits and do-does. You can take the word back to Foch that we're carrying the war in the air to them all the time. On their side of the lines all the time. And to hell with their Tornadoes. We're doing our share, and we have been ever since I took over. I'm sick of being kited back behind the infantry week after week. I'm through with that. We're standing here, by God, if we stand alone. What is the feeling in Paris as to where Kugelmann is going to be stopped?"

Colonel Serge Artzybasheff shrugged.

"Black," he said. "Black. They have no hope."

"But a drive like this can't go on for ever! Ammunition dwindles. The service of supply breaks down. Men themselves become exhausted, even Kugelmann's great almighty Guards. What are the reports from our espionage over there as to how the enemy strength is holding out?"

"Reports from the espionage?" said Artzybasheff.

"Yes, we must have some spies reporting. Or the Frogs have, anyway. What is the news that they send across?"

Colonel Artzybasheff planted his monocle in his eye, looking at the little grim Seahorse skipper an instant reflectively before replying. The Russian was an old acquaintance of Orlando Graunt, dating from twenty years before. He had come down from Paris to have supper and spend the night, and take a flight with the dawn patrol in the morning.

"Frankly, I'm a little surprised that you ask me that, Major," he said with a wrinkled smile. "I had thought that I might rather ask you. Really, you know as much about it as I do. Or maybe more. There

are spies, of course. But, what their reports are, or even how they transmit them, is something I don't know. Don't you?"

Graunt shook his head.

"Why should I? I have nothing to do with that sort of thing. We're a fighting outfit here."

"H'm!" said Artzybasheff. "Well, like yourself, I am merely an ally, and not privy to all the disastrous news which the French *espionage militaire* receives from across the lines. But the condition, we may assume, is black. Is the worst that can be imagined. There is no hope, really. It is going to be a question in a fortnight more of *saute qui peut*—let each man save himself. There will be a race between England, France, and Italy as to which of them can get out of the war soonest, and on the easiest terms. A race in which the abominable Bolsheviki who are temporarily in control of my country led the way. And though I hate them like all living hell, perhaps in that one item they showed themselves intelligent and with an eye to the best interests of Russia. The rest of them will be racing to get out soon enough, leaving America, as usual, to hold the bag. That's the opinion in Paris."

"Is that the opinion?" said Graunt with a muttering growl, showing his teeth.

"It is the certainty, I am afraid," said Artzybasheff with a sigh. "I know that you Yankees have orders to stop Kugelmann at the Marne, or let him go on over your dead bodies. But you cannot stop him. Consequently the second alternative, unfortunately, will be the order of the day. He will go on, over your dead bodies."

"If he walks on this chassis," said Orlando Graunt, "he'll get burrs in his feet!"

Artzybasheff shrugged again.

"It is too bad," he said. "It is more fun to win than lose. More fun to remain alive than die. Still, there it is. The Huns are better than we thought. You can't kick against immortal fate. But we seem to be waiting supper. You have some ships still out so late, major?"

"One," grumbled Orlando Graunt. "And over due. Trust those sons to be always late. They're like bats. They always fly at twilight. And keep us waiting to secure."

"Ah, a ship of yours that always flies at twilight?"

"Yes," said Graunt profanely. "A pair of cock-eyed bats. This squadron would be better off if we didn't have them."

HE stood, Major Orlando Graunt, with Artzybasheff in front of the headquarters shack as the twilight deepened, watching the great nimbus mountains and the higher, remoter cumulus ranges in the north through binoculars. A short, enormously broad little giant of a man, not more than five feet three inches high, with sloping forehead, bulging eyes, waxed mustache, and round stretched cheeks. His gorilla shoulders seemed too tight for his tunic, and his face too tight for his skin. A fighter from his soles up, hard, fearless, impetuous, a great aerial acrobat, he stood ready and eager at all times to launch himself into any kind of a battle that offered headlong and at once, like a round ball of beetle fury zinging at an arc light.

But perhaps for that very reason not too bright.

The last tinge of sunset had faded out of those clouds far in the north that he had his glasses fastened on now. They were all gray, with a touch of tarnished silver here and there where bare sky shone through rifts in the foggy mountains. The sky was apparently empty. But Graunt still thought that he had glimpsed a dot of tiny gnatlike wings miles away for an instant, darting high up from cloud to cloud.

"There the pair of sons come now," he said.

"Sons?" queried Artzybasheff. "*Fils, hein?* What is that which is that?"

"Native sons," explained the Seahorse skipper with a disparaging grunt. "One of our pilots named Norman and a sergeant named Crow. They were with old Bean at Fuminix when the squadron was first shipped across. Got away in one of the four or five ships that managed to escape when the kraut infantry cut the field off, and Pavian's Tornado was ganging them from the air. The few others of them who survived that day have all been washed out since, but Norman and Crow are still hanging on. The last of the origi-

nals, and they can't forget it. That's why I call them native sons."

"Lieutenant Inkee Norman and Sergeant Crow, the famous aces who shot down the great Captain Ernst Hegemann, adjutant of the Tornado, over Bar-le-Duc last month?" said the Russian, with a little start. "Yes, yes, their names are not unknown. Even in Paris. Is that the pair that you've been waiting for? I should like to meet them."

"They're not aces," said Graunt. "We don't play prima donnas and solo stars in this man's outfit. We're all doing the job, and we're all on the front. Norman's just another acrobat, no better particularly than the average turned out at Issoudun, while Crow just happens to be a cock-eyed shooting fool. They picked Hegemann off at the head of his formation from a thousand feet away, when the kraut didn't have any idea that he was within three times gun range. It was just luck. A Lewis gun isn't that good. No gunner is that good. But to hear those bozos tell it!"

"Yes, a hit at that distance would be undoubtedly blind luck," agreed the Russian thoughtfully. "Still they've brought down a good many others, too, I understand, your Crow and Norman. It has given them considerable of a reputation."

"That's just the trouble."

"And they are the pair which you meant have been showing a fondness for late flying, major?"

"They're the pair of bats."

"You don't seem to like them, particularly," said Artzybasheff thoughtfully.

ORLANDO GRAUNT lowered his goggles. That mote of a plane which he had thought he had seen was just a mote of air, he had decided. They might not have crossed the lines at all, he thought with disgust. They might have flown to Paris. No record in the log, as usual, as to where they had been headed for when they hopped off.

"Like them? Sure, I like them fine," he said with an indignant snort. "The only thing I don't like about them is that they think they're superhuman. Built of some finer and creamier stuff than the rest of us second-string mortals. The only thing I don't like about the pair of sons is that

they snoot me. They've got a drag with Foch and Gourand because of that time they saved Lenoir, the old Vulture ace, from being ganged, and because of the time they helped the escape of Jacqueline Tonnerre, the star Frog spy. They've been given carte blanche over my head to fly when and as they please. They don't know that they belong to this squadron. They don't know that I'm their skipper. They're still part of the heroic Whistleberry Bean's immortal 10th, and they can't forget it."

"Ah," said the Russian.

"Listen, colonel," the little Seahorse skipper said indignantly, "I could have come with them myself, and don't think by the number 3 blue billiard ball that I didn't want to! I could have been a glory-hunter, one of the originals. But I knew damned well that none of us were trained to fight the Huns at that time. I stayed back with the boys to go through all the grind of acrobatics, aerial marksmanship, and formation flying with them, and every other trick that I knew we had to have. Believe me, it was more dangerous on the other side than here, too, at the time. We killed off more men, and we flew all the time. While when Bean first landed at Fuminix with that half-baked gang of his they didn't average a flight every two weeks, and they didn't see a flying Hun for seven. They were all just on a picnic. They came to meet the girls in Paris. College clucks like this young Norman, who didn't know which end of a plane was the front. Dumb ex-cow hands like Crow. They weren't doing any fighting or flying. They didn't know how. They were just strutting around in their uniforms, and shooting crap, all the time that back across there in training camp we were going through the grind of learning to be fighting men."

"All right, suddenly Kugelmann started this hell-driven push of his down from Longwy at the end of May, and Pavian was called down from the British front with all his Tornado to be the aerial spearhead of it and mop up the skies. So before they knew it this bunch of misfits, mudhens, and sawdust aces of Bean's were in the war, up to their necks without a paddle. Jammed up against it, win or die. They had the pants fried off them. They

damn near died to a man. And that makes them heroes, does it? By the eternal living Godfrey, the Seahorse 10th is a great and everlasting squadron, you said it, Artzybasheff! There's not a better fighting outfit in the air, and there never has been. Not even Pavian's gang itself, ship for ship today, nor Norek's and Lenoir's famous old bunch of French Vultures in their prime, before Pavian had torn hell out of them and wrecked them all. But it's Orlando H. Grant's 10th which is the damned good fighting squadron, and not Whistleberry Bean's! It's these trained birds of mine that I've brought over who know how to fight and fly, and not that old gang of flying squirrels and short-tailed ducks. If anybody says anything to me again about Bean's immortal 10th, I'll—by the living crinky, I'll eat him! Raw."

The little Trojan made strangling noises in his throat. He seemed ready to explode out of his skin, and fully capable of carrying out his threat as he glared at Artzybasheff with bulging eyes, curling his mustache points. The Russian made a protesting gesture with his hand.

"I understand. There are always those jealousies and antagonisms one finds, of course, in any outfit," he agreed, in a soothing tone. "Say no more about it, major."

"Jealous!" said Graunt. "Gah! It's as if you took an old tomato can, and put a wonderful engine in it and some swell upholstery and painted it, and planted wheels under it, and stuck a coat of arms on the door, and did everything else to turn it into a Rolls-Royce—and then found everybody was saying the reason it was such a good Roll-Royce was because of the old tomatoes that had been in the old tin can. There you are. This is the Seahorse 10th, and it's a great machine. But it hasn't got a damned thing to do with the tomato can that it was made of except the same squadron name, and these two pieces of old fruit hanging on."

"I understand, I understand," said Artzybasheff. "They spoil the upholstery."

"In a way I feel sorry for the pair of them," said Graunt, scanning the sky again with his tight face uplifted. "I do indeed.

They haven't kept pace with modern combat. They don't know what it's all about. They can't fly formation to save their necks. And you're clear out of it in this day and age if you don't know how to fight as a unit in the squadron. The Huns taught us that, and maybe we've developed a few tricks of our own to teach back to the Huns. But these lone old-timers. They keep me on pins every time they're out. Any roving kraut patrol is liable to take them in its stride any day. They can't count on targeting a Hegemann with a fluke shot from a thousand feet and disrupting an attack every time. Five of fifteen ships will gang them, and they're burned before they know it. That's the end of the old originals. In a way, I suppose, there will be no one sorrier than me."

"I understand," said Serge Artzybasheff.

HE smiled faintly, with a face clean-shaven and wrinkled fine like old leather. He wore the white peaked cap, the white bechmet tunic, and black trousers stuffed into black boots of the Russian summer aviation uniform. There wasn't any Russian army any more. There wasn't any Russia even. There was something called the United Federation of Socialistic Soviet Republics, and its high War Commissar Leon Trotsky had signed a peace treaty with the German empire at Brest-Litovsk. But a man who wore the golden epaulets on his shoulders was still a Russian colonel, and entitled to the recognition of his rank among his allies. A Russian colonel, in fact, was in a much more enviable position than any other kind of a colonel, since there was no power left which could ever demote him or retire him, and he enjoyed his position in perpetuity, like a Confederate banknote. When the revolution in Russia broke Artzybasheff had been a member of the Czar's military mission to Paris, and though there was no longer any Czar he was still missioning.

The only trouble was that his pay had stopped.

"So they have been presented with a roving commission, have they, thanks to the intercession of the French over your head, to fly on lone prowls when they want,

these two old tomatoes of yours, major?" he said.

"Yes, but they don't wear it out. The weather's got to be just right for them."

"And they always hop around sunset when they hop, and come back in twilight, is that so?"

"Sure. The air's smoother then."

"And always cloudy days?"

"Well, Lord knows that's the only thing that will save a lone ship. Yes, generally cloudy days, I guess. But not too cloudy. They're no rain-eagles."

"Will you have a cigaret?"

Artzybasheff proffered his case, filled with small striped cardboard-tipped Russian cigarets. He lit one for himself, and blew thoughtfully.

"Norman or else Crow," he mused, "was somewhat acquainted with Mademoiselle Jacqueline Tonnerre, once of the Paris Folies, who is now the famous J-4-T of the French espionage, as everybody knows—I think you mentioned, major? So I had heard somewhere myself."

"Crow saved her life once in the early days when the squadron was stationed at Fuminix, I think," said Graunt. "Landed in Hunland by accident and picked her up when they were hot after her. At least, that's the story he always tells. There's hardly a week passes by that he doesn't brag about it. Probably it's true, at that. He's the kind of a dumb lucky ape who would land in Hunland without knowing he was on the wrong side of the lines. The Frogs gave him a medal."

"She has been sent back across there again, the rumor goes," murmured Artzybasheff. "Where she has found a sanctuary and hideout I don't believe even the French Intelligence knows. Perhaps at Kugelmann's own headquarters at Outres. Perhaps up at the great German railhead and division point at Longwy. *She* is the French espionage which you suggested must exist behind the enemy lines, and she only. The rest have been wiped out. The system of communication was destroyed. Yet it appears that she is still continuing—I am happy to say—to transmit back very valuable information as to enemy strength and condition. Do you see any possible connection between the roving commission

which Lieutenant Norman and Sergeant Crow have been granted, at the intercession of the French, and the presence of *la jolie blonde* Jacqueline behind the enemy lines, major?"

He clapped the stocky little Marine skipper on the back jovially.

"I am a man of an idle and curious turn of mind, Orlando," he went on. "It is a rather penetrating idea that, wherever Mademoiselle Jacqueline is, she is sending back her information by some system of ground signals which are picked up by an Allied plane or planes flying over at agreed on times. For a fortnight the enemy have been trying to watch Lenoir, the old Black Lightning of the Spads, the last of Norck's old Vultures, to catch signals being sent to him and so disclose her location. He always flies, it is curious, at dawn. He has been glimpsed in his black plane on cloudy mornings over Longwy and Outres. But why not your own Norman and Crow, too, who also have been acquainted with her? The thought just occurred to me. In fact, it occurred last night while I lay sleeping, and I woke up, and could not sleep again. It would be a feather in their caps if they have been chosen for a service so delicate and important. And an added honor, of course, to your squadron which has the distinction of containing them."

Orlando Graunt glared with a snap of angry eyes.

"Thanks, Serge," he grinned, with a gleaming grin after a moment. "Trying to get my goat, aren't you? Well, you don't win. Why mayn't that pair of old originals be on some contact mission like that? Why, I'll tell you in six words. They couldn't keep their traps shut. Crow couldn't resist the temptation to brag about it and swagger around even more than he does. The whole squadron would know it. He is the sort of fellow who talks his guts out."

"Some men talk a lot, and say nothing," murmured the Russian reflectively. "On the whole, that is a much better way than silence."

Orlando Graunt had his binoculars focused on the sky again, swinging them around the horizon. As he heeled around upon the great darkening clouds in the

north again, he saw black smoke puffs going up, bursting amidst the cloud layers, miles away.

"New batteries, by George!" he said.

At once they signed off. Did he see, or did he only imagine, whole swarms of tiny orange and ghost-gray ships no bigger than the points of pins darting and disappearing amidst the immense gray haystacks of those far off twilight mountains? He could not be sure. But a feeling of death was in his bones.

"By the crinky, they're after them!" he snarled. "The Fokkers are ganging them! The poor damned half-wits! Well, they can't say I didn't tell them so!"

He dropped his binoculars. He catapulted his chunky body in a headlong sprint toward the hangars.

"Get ships out! We're shooting a patrol off. *Allez hop!* There're Fokkers swarming over there, and they look like Pavian's damned killers! They're heading this way through the cloud! Stand by the guns!"

There were ships always fueled up on the 10th's drome, loaded up, and generally warmed up, ready to roar off into the air at any time. The hangar gang had rushed eight of them out, and were spinning their clubs over, before Graunt had grabbed his helmet and goggles from his mechanic. Out of barracks, gunners and pilots racing. The spurt and howl of Liberties. Not waiting to fasten their helmet straps, men leaping into ships. But it would take too long, even with the best of luck in getting cold ships started. Beyond the Marne over Hunland, miles away. . . .

III

SEAHORSE De Haviland spinning down out of control toward the rushing earth. And Inky Norman in the front cockpit with arms and head swinging over-side. Swaying and swinging as the wild crate jerked. Okie Crow clutched his flinched cockpit rim with smoking automatic. The Kraut ships themselves seemed to be whirling, jerking into sight now to right, now to left, in a straight bow-to-tail formation ripping past. Like a line of Indian horsemen galloping in circles on

lightning steeds. But it was only the wild headlong rotation of the DH itself which gave that illusion, Okie knew.

"Cock-eyed Sioux!"

In a chain of orange-winged links they flashed past within wing-brushing length, so close they seemed, as the cursing blonde gunner fired his Colt wildly at them, destroying the code message in the barrel which he had transcribed from the signals of the French girl spy. They rose upward in a loop, a chain of rockets, quick and beautifully drilled, led by the great black V of their Tornado captain. Swift loop of victory, Pavian's battle sign! High, high! On the crest of the zoom their inverted wings, making a fire-bright rainbow arc in heaven, swept out of Okie's sight momentarily beyond the DeHaviland's wild whipping aerofoils. Still going up, still soaring, while the stricken pilotless DeHaviland went whirling down. To those that win let there be wings, and skies for zooming! To those that lose, the earth and death.

Cloud and twilight stars and earth all whirling. Bending down again, Okie tried to reach the emergency stick that had rolled loose on the floor.

From five thousand feet they had spun down to one, and less than that, in their crazy jerking four-cornered rush in half a minute. Power spin. Engine screaming. The ground came leaping up at them like the whirl of a giant windmill, round and round.

All this Okie saw in a split instant. They were spinning to a smash in fourteen seconds. Two thousand feet above him in the sky the rainbow arc of looping bright orange Fokkers whirled again into his view, bow to tail like leaping porpoises on their backs, following their great Tornado captain in their rocket sweep of victory. But as Okie caught sight of them again, on the crest of the loop, the last ship but one of them from the end of the formation was wobbling its wings and falling off. Still upside down.

Whip-uh-whuck! the Seahorse plane's wires screamed and the wind slapped her whirling wings. Her engine growled in roars of sound. Not more than half a minute. Desperately Okie had got the

emergency stick connected in its socket now. He jammed it down. He gave it hard down rudder in a rush. He wasn't going to let them be smeared over a half-acre of Hunland, if there was still sky-room in which to straighten out before they hit.

The whirling ground came leaping up like a rotating wall, then almost in the last instant they were straightening out in a wild swoop of air, with nose headed down in a roaring dive. The earth shot toward them headlong three hundred feet away, and coming like a mountain, and squads of Krauts below were running with bent heads and scattering in all directions to get away from under. Now—

Okie felt the stick snatched out of his hand, the rudder kicked away from him, in that moment. In the front cockpit Inky Norman had straightened up with a jerk. Inky had seized the controls.

"Not too soon, you damned fool!" Inky yelled.

WITH a bellowing howl of their thumping Liberty Inky was hurtling them across the ground not fifty feet high, hedge-hopping above the faces of the startled and furious Krauts, through a hail of rifle and machine-gun slugs that began to spurt at them. With streaking wings, with motor churning up everything she had, feathering her with a delicate and steady hand on the stick, he was heading them across the roaring ground toward the American lines on the Marne!

"Why, you skunk!" howled Okie. "Spin her down a cock-eyed mile, will you, and never give me a sign!"

"Had to make it look real!" Inky yelled. "Where are they now?"

"After us like holy sixty!" Okie howled. "And I hope they get you this time right, you sneaking coyote! Giving me the beebies!"

In the sky above and behind them a half mile away the five fire-bright Fokkers had completed their victory loop, begun too soon. Swooping down, opening up their howling clubs again, they were straightening out with fury in pursuit of the sprawling Yankee DH which had tricked them, the jammed wild-west gunner and the dead

pilot who had refused to stay dead.

Okie's ears were filled with Liberty roar, deafened still with the wind-rush of their spin. Fifty feet beneath their streaking wheels the twilight ground and smoke and knots of shouting men rushed by, and star rockets rose, and guns burred and flashed. Crouching, facing aft, he stood ready to bluff with his useless gun, swirling the swivel-mount, pretending to slam on a new drum, and all of that. But it took more than monkey-gestures to stop a patrol of the Orange Tornado. The swift-looping quintet of fire-bright Fokkers had been a half mile in the air when the presumably helpless and out-of-control DH, spinning to its crash, had suddenly straightened out almost on top of the earth and headed off on its wild skim away. From the crest of the loop they had shot down with howling Benzes, still in flawless and beautiful battle line, like five wolves of hell upon the hunt, like a chain of fire-rockets in the twilight, and they were coming down the sky trail at three miles a minute, led by the great black V of Pavian!

No, not all five of them! There was the next to the last ship in the lightning train which had gone hurtling past the spinning DH a minute or two ago up there while Okie fired his Colt at their line of blurring streaks, and which had gone up looping with the rest, but which at the top of the maneuver, a split second before the rest, had fallen off.

It was going down now, out of formation! The other four were leaving it behind them in the sky as they heeled into a fan and streaked in pursuit of the ground-skimming Yankee ship. It was going down for earth, that fire-bright Fokker, out of the formation, out of battle, following no longer the great black V of Pavian, but doing a crazy circling skid of its own and falling leaf. Following no longer, lost from the formation, out of the battle forever.

"Winged!" howled Okie. "By the living Godfrey! How's that for shooting a rattlesnake's head off at the gallop! I knew one of those slugs was going to land somewhere before it hit the moon! Keel, Ink! They're diving!"

The floorboards heaved up beneath him

as Inky Norman flipped over, steep on roaring ear. He was hurled sprawling against his swivel-ring, and his knees sagged beneath him with the pull of centrifugal force and the blood rushed down out of his brain. *Tac-tac-tac!* the dry Maxim pecking of those double guns rattled above the steep howling of the Liberty. Tracers were shooting through their struts as they heeled in that split second. Those rushing ships had uncorked it from five hundred feet, and even at that distance it would have been a hit but for Inky's wild swerve. Facing back with blazing eyes, Okie cursed and slammed the spade-grip of his useless gun. Four pairs of double Maxims! He couldn't help but admire the fast way they keeled and threw their tracers in swift arcs toward the target again, still coming. But, ah, to face those terrible guns, and helpless!

"Come on, you sons of lice—!"

Blam!

There was a hell of a noise and repercussion which threw the DH's wings around in the air like a wild leaf. *Blam!* But they were out of it by then. Great roars splitting the air. They were in range of the American A. A. guns! By Joe, they were over them! And the guns had opened up point-blank with vertical snouts belching shrapnel and old iron at those kill-crazy Fokkers behind.

Blamma, blamma, blamma!

But the Fokkers weren't there any more. They knew those guns upon the Marne.

IV

THE fierce Kraut ships had keeled, split-essing, winging over, tumbling out of the way of those furious point-blank shells, heading back in zigzagging flight five hundred feet above the ground, while the zinging shells went screaming at them and the shrapnel burst above. Two thousand feet higher, and they would have all been caught. Even so, it was warm enough.

Two thousand feet high a patrol of eight Seahorse DeHavillands on the climb went roaring over as Inky skimmed across the Marne. Orlando Graunt, hurling himself like a wolverine to the attack. But the Fokkers were too far away, and the night

was darkening. The booming Yankee two-seaters above heeled over, came sliding down the sky with throttled motors, and fell into position a couple of hundred feet in front, a hundred above. Herding them on.

"Escort of motorcycle cops!" yelled Okie.

"Taking us to the jug," Inky Norman leaned his head back to shout, with a pale grin.

Their motor died as they came coughing and wallowing over the ridge poles of the tent hangars. Half stalling, they hit ground wing down, in a one-wheel strut-cracking bump, and dragged to a splintering stop in mid field. Okie helped the tall white-faced pilot out.

"Better get the doc at work on that hand, Ink," he said.

"Only a smear," said Inky. "But all for nothing. You jettisoned the code?"

"With a bang, said Okie. "Don't give me white hairs again with that dead stuff!"

"Did I fool you?" said Inky with a pale grin. "It wasn't altogether fooling. I mean that a splinter from that flying sieve they made out of your coaming knocked me dizzy. I guess it looked like a wipe out to them when I played the dead man. I tried to make it look like the real thing."

"You played it well, Ink," said Okie. "But you won't fool me again."

"Nor the Krauts, either, I'm afraid. They need to be taught a trick like that only once. I didn't have much hope that it would fool Pavian even this time. He generally makes damned sure of his kill. He waits till he sees them burning before he starts this looping stuff."

"It wasn't Pavian," Okie shook his head.

"No, probably not."

Orlando Graunt's patrol had landed on the tarmac ahead of them. With snortling motor the Seahorse skipper taxied his plane up to them.

"Joy-hopping?" he said grimly.

Just a loose prowl, sir."

You'll get the joy hopped out of you some day. What do you think you are "

"I give up, sir," said Okie.

"I'll tell you what you are," shouted Graunt angrily, climbing out of his ship. "You're a pair of bang-up Hun aces. Five

Yankee ships you've crashed, and never a loss to yourself. That's a pretty good record."

He examined the K-33's splintered wing with passionate disgust.

"I suppose the motor pooped, and you were too low to pick a landing," he said. "Keep her up next time. You came skimming back across the ground so low there I could hardly see you."

"Neither could the Krauts, sir," said Inky coolly. "That's why we're here."

"You took Hun steel, I see. Where were you, Crow, when this burst came ripping across your cockpit coaming?"

"I was down beneath, reaching for my Colt."

"Colt! And I suppose you blazed away with your Colt at them, and got a couple of them? We're going to have a line of that now, are we?"

"Not a couple, but one," said Okie, chewing slowly. "You said it, kid."

"Kid—!" foamed Orlando Graunt, wild-eyed.

For a moment he faced them with a sound of crunching teeth, weighing his doubled fists and measuring Okie's chin. He would have given, perhaps, a dime to have been an enlisted man again, and free to fight. Instead, he heeled away. He climbed wordlessly into his ship again.

Inky Norman shook his head. "You have a genius, Oke," he said as they moved toward barracks, "for getting in hell and hot water with your skippers. I think it was you who named poor old Bean the Whistleberry. He died hating you."

"He was a good guy," said Okie.

"They're all good men when they die," said Inky. "You and I will be good guys someday, Oke. And old Orlando will tell of the time he knew us when, in a weepy voice, and scatter dandelions and big salt tears on our graves. Even the Huns will be good guys some day, a hundred years from now. Even Kugelmann and the Kaiser and Pavian."

"They'll never die, said Okie. "They'll go on forever."

"What made you say that Kraut in the number V Fokker leading them wasn't Pavian? That's Pavian's number, as everybody knows. His own battle wagon."

"Pavian wouldn't have let up," said Okie. "He'd have been sure he had us burned. That Kraut leading didn't want to burn us. He wanted something left of the wreck so he could prow through it and find any messages we might have. And perhaps, if there was something left of us, put us on the grill. He was just a little too soon and sure of himself, that was all. Pavian wouldn't have let up. He's a killer in the air. Crazy as a shrike. When he sees an Allied ship, there's something boils up in him which can't let him stop killing. I guess it's what you'd call a psychological twist in college. He wouldn't stop at burning his own mother. I've met him, you understand. That time I got away with Jacqueline. But on the ground he's just like any average man. He wouldn't go out of his way, I figure him, to down us as near intact as possible, and leave us to be steamed by the Intelligence. What's the Intelligence to him? He's a killer first, like Graunt. No, he wasn't leading that patrol. It may have been somebody in the Kraut Intelligence, just a pretty good pilot, who had borrowed his ship for the glory of the number, and was leading a patrol that either followed us or was laying for us. If they'd given us Pavian himself, we'd be cooked meat by now. Someway I have an idea that we are going to see that big black V again, and not so long from now."

"Why?"

Okie chewed and spat.

"Why do you know when the big snake-eyes are coming up on the dice, Ink? You don't, but you think you do."

"I wish I had your hunches!" said Inky Norman.

"No, you don't. Some of them are pretty black. And I have a big black hunch right now that something pretty unpleasant is laying for the last of Whistleberry Bean's old 10th, and for Jacqueline Tonnerre. Why give yourself bad dreams that way, and see black things coming? It's better to be sunny, and think everything's all right."

HE sat on the rear steps of the cook's shack after mess, the blond ex-cow nurse from Oklahoma, playing with a length of rope which he had noosed into a

lariat, and eating steak sandwiches with his free fist.

"Out in Painted Horse county, cooky, where I come from," he said, riffing the loop across the grass, "any man who can't shoot a sidewinder's ears off at a distance of forty feet, firing from the hip and riding at a thirty mile gallop, is called a squaw. And any man who can't throw a rope with one free hand around the left hind leg of a bull calf at eighty feet, while reading the Police Gazette propped on his saddle horn and rolling a cigarette with the other fist, isn't allowed to wear pants. I was a peeler when I was fourteen years old, and boss wrangler on the Jingle-Q when I was eighteen. Far be it from me to mention it, but if you don't think I'm good, cooky, just ask me."

"Gee, that sounds the life to me," said the cook mournfully, standing at the door. "I always wanted to be a cowboy. For forty years. Do you think you could get me a job after this war, Okie, if I go west?"

"What was your job in civil life, cooky?"

"Motorman on the Boston elevated."

"Hell, you ought to have been an aviator yourself. But I suppose you got tired of heights."

"No, I applied for the aviation. That's the reason they made me a cook."

"I was smart," said Okie. "I wanted to get into the old air, so I applied for the cavalry. But how else could you run a war? You sure cut small steak sandwiches, cooky. Do you use manicure scissors, or what? Out in Painted Horse we cut them two feet wide and three inches thick. And any man who can't wrap himself around eight of them at one squatting is regarded as a Republican and not allowed to vote."

"You said that before," said Cooky. "And you ain't a man anyway, you're a horse. You et two full plates at mess, and that's your third sandwich afterwards. You ain't supposed to have steak anyway. That's officer's chow. The skipper's got this Rooshian colonel spending the night, and we didn't have any too much for him."

"Rooshian nut," said Okie. "The boy in white?"

"That's him."

"Old leather-face, with the golden ailerons," said Okie. "I saw him through the windows of officers mess a while ago, feeding Inky and the skipper a bottle of vodka. And if he thinks he's going to start any hot time in the old town by feeding Inky one bottle of vodka he doesn't know his Ink. Like water down a sewer. So, by crimony, a Russky means more to you, does he, Bean-face, than the ace gunner of the Seahorse Marines and the former boss wrangler of the Jingle-Q? Well, you can take your chow and stick it up on the top shelf of your ice-box. As a cook your a good motorman, anyway."

"Listen," said Bean-face, "you toss that rope of yours with one hand over that clump of bush over there, and I'll give you another sammich."

"Sold," said Okie, as the rope whirled.

He got up and retrieved it. He eyed the sandwich which the cook handed out to him disparagingly, and swallowed it in two gulps.

"That steak wasn't cut from a horse," he said. "It was cut from a horse fly."

"The trouble with you is that you've got a stomach bigger than your eyes," said the cook belligerently. "You're still growing. At nineteen I had my growth, and was willing to settle down to reasonable eating, but you just keep on growing. It's that tobacco you're always chewing that makes you hungry. The Marines aren't making anything out of you. They're losing money hand over fist. If you don't like that sammich and want a real sammich, let's see you stand up backwards with your eyes closed and lasso that old fence post there, if you're so good."

"Can I cut the steak myself?" said Okie..

"Wait a minute!" said the cook in a hushed whisper, seizing him by the shoulder. "Listen, there comes the old commissary sergeant now, sneaking up to see if I'm feeding any of you gyrenes out of hours. I'd know his step in a million. Let's see you lasso him!"

There was a soft and catlike tread approaching around the corner of the mess shack.

"How much steak do I get if I snitch him by the left leg and lift his heels

over his ears?" Okie said from the corner of his mouth.

"How much? You can have the whole darned cow!"

Okie riffled the lariat, sitting with ears cocked. The loop went snaking across the grass like a thing alive toward the corner of the shack. The soft step approached, furtively but importantly, while Bean-face held his ribs with silent laughter, waiting.

Whick!

As a foot appeared Okie snatched the rope, springing up and back. There was the sound of a bump and an unintelligible oath. The loop had tightened on a booted black ankle which came hurtling into view, followed by the striped black breeches, white coat and startled leathery face of Colonel Serge Artzybasheff of the Imperial Russian armies sliding rapidly into view.

"**S**ORRY!" Okie said in flushed contrition, while the terrified Bean-face fled inside the cook shack door. "I thought you were somebody else."

"I rather wish I were, right at the moment," said Artzybasheff feeling his posterior.

As Okie sprang toward him to help him up, however, he began to laugh. He sat there laughing and laughing, till Okie had to grin with him. A jolly fellow. He picked up his cap and his dropped monocle. Arising, he kicked away the loop of the rope, and replaced his monocle, dusting off the seat of his breeches with slaps of his hand.

"I am Colonel Artzybasheff," he introduced himself merrily. "And you are Crow, I think. I used to know your skipper when we were both stationed in Peking, twenty years ago. I was a lieutenant, and he was a tough young leatherneck private then. We both liked the same girl is how we met. I remember he beat up my China boy once when he found him in her house with flowers I'd sent. And another time I had three guards waylay him to beat him up, and he used them rather badly. Oh, we were great rivals in those days. But you can imagine which one of us won."

"You don't need to tell me, sir," said Okie. "I've seen the gold-braid outrank the gunmetal buttons before. You won,

hands down."

"Not at all," said Artzybasheff with a chuckle. "Neither of us won. The girl ran off with a soap salesman. But from that a beautiful friendship sprang up. Since those days your Graunt and I have run into each other here and again. And now in this war, by curious coincidence."

"It's amazing how many people do meet in this war, sir," said Okie carefully. "I suppose it's because there are so many people in it."

"That's the reason! Very well put, sergeant. If nobody were in the war, nobody would meet. Ha, ha! I see you are a very clever fellow. You think things out. I like the way your mind runs, quick and keen. I have a feeling that we are going to be old friends and comrades, too, if we both live long enough. Will you have a cigaret?"

"Thanks," said Okie watchfully.

"Unbend, man, unbend!" said the Russian genially, sitting there informally beside him with gold-leafed cap and golden epaulets on the cook house steps. "Haven't you ever sat with a colonel before? You Yankees are always boasting about your American democracy, but at heart you are really Prussians, class-conscious snobs. It sticks out all over you, in your awe of rank and titles. In Holy Russia there is none of that. There officer and man, lord and serf, sit at the same board and drink from the same bottle, as a father sits with his children. My men always called me *tovarich*—comrade—and we broke the last crust together on the march and competed for the smiles of the same women. And when I had to punish them with the whip, it was only as a father punishes his children. Unbend! I am a comrade of your commanding lord, and of you."

"Nice of you to give your time to the serfs this way, sir," said Okie.

"Not at all! I have heard of you, Crow," said the Russian genially. "Or Okushi, as I will call you, which means Little Okie. I had the pleasure of supping with your team-mate Lieutenant Norman, and he told me that you are acquainted with Jacqueline Tonnerre, *la belle* Jacqueline, our lovely young dancing star of the Paris stage. Or perhaps it was your commander

who told me. La belle Jacqueline is an old adoration of mine, likewise. And as a man whose taste in femininity has long been regarded as the final word, I affirm to you that there is none lovelier under heaven. Please extend those sentiments of mine to her the next time you see her."

"Thanks," said Okie carefully. "I'd like to. But I never get to Paris."

"Ah, but she is not in Paris!" said the Russian in a lowered voice, bending his wrinkled face over confidentially. "They have sent her over there again, behind the enemy lines, as I see you do not know. A dark and dangerous business. I begged her not to risk it again, but she must do it. For France. Alone among the Huns, and death around her every minute. A ghastly risk to run. A cruel fate awaiting her. It gives me the horrors when I think of it. You and I are fighting men. But why must such things be?"

Okie felt his heart a little cold. It was as if the cold leathery forefinger of the Russian which lay upon his wrist and pressed against the pulsing life vein there had wound around his heart.

"It's part of the game of war, I guess, colonel," he managed to say, in an indifferent voice. "The Huns have their own spies, too. Someone has to do it."

"But none like her! Those young and graceful limbs, those great dark eyes! The way she had of saying, 'I am glad to see you, *cher*! How *are* you, how *are* you?' with that little eager laugh in her voice, as if it meant much to her, though you were little more than a stranger. Ah, you remember! You remember, Okushi! Now that her location has been discovered, now that the fierce dogs of the enemy counter-spies are closing in on her, all of that to be ended! Those great dark eyes, that golden head, to face the leveled rifles. Those slender limbs to lie quivering a moment convulsively on the dirt of the execution floor, and then to move no more!"

"Her location has been discovered, you say!" repeated Okie with a dry throat.

"Yes, yes," said the Russian in hushed tones. "Lenoir of the Vultures picked up a message from her at dawn today, which,

brought back and decoded, reported that she was in grave and immediate danger. Perhaps even now it is all over."

So that was the import of the code message which he and Inky had received, too, thought Okie, and which he had destroyed in fear of capture! News that she was being closed in on, or perhaps more final even, her last death message to them as they cruised through the cloud in the high sky. Oh, he was only a dumb ape-face, an ignorant cow-hand, without name or money or importance in this world, without even a shavetail's bars on his shoulders or wings on his chest. And great men had loved her, generals and senators and millionaires, dead Rene Norck the great Vulture ace had loved her, and even Pavian, the fierce dark king of the Hun Tornado, meeting her over there where she had come to spy on him, before he had known what she was. Great fierce proud arrogant men. But he, too, Okie Crow, could humbly worship beauty like hers as well as the greatest of them, and her brave gallant spirit, and be willing to give his life for her if he could only do so.

He tightened his big square hands on the rope which he was fondling.

"Discovered!" he said, wetting his lips. "Do you know whether it was while she was sending signals by the slanting dawn light to Lenoir, or by the sunset light to —someone else? Who was it that flew too near, while being watched, and gave the place away? Whose fault was it?"

"Lenoir's," said Artzybasheff. "But the thing has been done. Do not blame him. It had to happen sometime. We must do what we can to help her now, that is all. We must go over there, and rescue her."

"What, and land on the drome of the Tornado at Fuminix!"

"At Fuminix," murmured Artzybasheff. Okie bit his tongue. The blood seemed to rush from his heart. His jaws were locked and white. He sat stiffly a long moment, without turning his head to the man beside him. But he was aware, it seemed to him, of the Russian's slow, quiet triumphant breathing, like the snoring of a cat which had captured and eaten the

mouse long hunted, or like the inaudible humming of a man who has won a great pot at poker on a bluff, as he rakes in his winnings. And out of the edges of his stony unwinking eyes he was aware of the Russian bending over to pick up an ant from the ground at his feet, and examining it between forefinger and thumb, then slowly and firmly crushing it.

"At Fuminix," murmured Serge Artzybasheff dreamily. "Yes, the Huns located her transmitting messages to Lenoir from Fuminix. That was how they found her. The most of them had been looking for her, first, at Kuglemann's own great headquarters at Outres; and, second, at the great division point at Longwy; and, third, at Brix where she had been before. But it was the fourth guess, Fuminix. *Slava bog!* Well, it is too bad that she had to be discovered."

Okie sat with locked jaws while the darkness of the moonless night fell upon them, and insects sang, and the ground beneath his feet shivered with the vibration of great artillery and the march of a million men. He riffled his rope in snake loops across the ground, and hauled it back, and sent it forth in writhing coils again, and he could say no more.

"You are very clever with that rope, my friend," said the Russian after a while.

The young gyrene nodded faintly.

"Yes," he managed to get command of his voice, slowly and evenly, without turning his eyes. "You may not believe it, but you could jump up now without a word and start running, and before you got out of reach I could jerk it so quick and tight around your neck that you would never breathe again. Do you want me to demonstrate?"

Colonel Artzybasheff ground out his cigarette on the plank he was sitting on.

"I'll take your word for it," he said good-naturedly, getting leisurely up. "Your previous demonstration was quite sufficient. There is really as much art in tripping a man up as in hanging him, isn't there, at that? I have enjoyed it, sergeant. But I must to bed. Your skipper has promised me a flight early in the morning if the sky hasn't got worse by then. It has been long since I have had a stick in my hand,

yet once I was supposed to be rather good, and I am looking forward to it. Perhaps you'll fly with me? Anyway, I wish you goodnight."

Setting his cap more jauntily on his head, he went cat-footing away in the darkness. His white-coated form vanished around the corner of the cook shack. But still the ghost of his dry voice seemed lingering in the air, and the cold clutch of his fingers around Okie's heart.

"I sang!" the young gyrene cursed himself, frozen with fury and despair. "He cranked me up and I sang, like a damned victrola. It was what he wanted to find out and didn't he play me for it!"

Yet there was only his own alarmed intuition. An inflection of the Russian's dry voice, a quiet word. It was hard to feel utterly convinced, without some lingering doubt, that a man of the position of Colonel Serge Artzybasheff of the Czar's Imperial Military mission could be a traitor.

V

THROUGH the rocking pockets of the great rain clouds and the sudden sheets which struck like bullets at him, with the lightning ripping on his tail Pavian came flying. Captain Max Pavian, Order of the Red Eagle, Order of the Star of Prussia, commanding officer and top ace of Fokker J. S. 70, the *Oranger Orkan*, the terrible Orange Tornado.

Flying his fire-bright Fokker with its orange wings and fuselage, its flame-yellow tail and fiery engine head. With the pattee crosses on it, and the smoky twist of the Tornado which was his battle sign, and the great black V which told to all the skies that he alone was Pavian.

Machine-gun flurries of water beat on his wind-cowling as he went feathering with throttled motor at a mile and a half a minute. It beat upon his black crash helmet, which was like a football player's, with deafening drums. His goggles were washed and blind, his broad forehead beneath the helmet rim and his square jaws above his high-buttoned leather collar were beaten red.

He came out of the clouds, though still

in the rain, at a thousand feet. Above him the tossing nimbus went traveling on, filled with the swirl of arms and fantastic shapes, like the ghosts of eight million men who in this war had been hurled into the waters of the Styx. Oh, endlessly, tossing, and flowing on, tenuous immaterial, forever. Below him he saw the wide curve of the Barcy that ran past his field, its silver waters now brown and beaten by rain bullets, and his great camber-roofed hangars, shops, and barracks, painted in fantastic spots and with the black pattee crosses on their roofs. Rain beat in pools on the sodden field, where the tracks of his taking off still shone. It beat upon the neat gravel walks and the formal German gardens which were laid out between the hangars and the river. The bright flowers were dark now beneath the storm, the wren-house on a pole and the big mirror globe set on a stone pedestal without which no German garden would be complete both stood, looking singularly desolate, with puddles of water collected around their bases.

Only the actual ground, the field itself, remained of the old drome of the 10th U. S. Marines which had once stood here, with their crude tent hangars and temporary shacks. With German thoroughness and love of domesticity the gray-clad engineers had built as if to last for forty years, as they had built the great Hindenburg, Wotan, and Siegfried trench lines. Concrete and steel, an electric power plant, an ice-making plant, a telephone system, a bathing house down by the Barcy's edge. There was no iron fence around the cemetery at the woods edge beyond the field where Major Whistleberry Bean and the marines who had died with him at the taking of the field lay buried, and sometimes of quiet evenings Pavian would stroll down there and lean with arms crossed upon the fence, smoking his pipe and contemplating in silence the nature of the universe and the meaning of death. Then knocking out his pipe and straightening to attention with a salute ere he departed.

For they had been brave men, though not at all sky champions, and they had fought to the death and held back a whole brigade of Kugelmann's great Invincibles.

And Pavian admired great fighting men, for without them to go against he would not be great Pavian himself. A man does not become a Tornado king by knocking over sheep.

He who had met great Rene Norck in duel ship to ship, and had been downed, but had got away, and had lived to see Norck die on the ground at his feet. He who had met Florent Lenoir, the Black Lightning of the Spads, that had been perhaps as great a man as Norck, and had out-jockeyed him and out-maneuvered him in whirling sky-screaming fight, and had got on the Black Lightning's tail. He who with his great Tornado had downed and wiped out all the last of the great Vultures.

THE wind sock hung soaked and plastered to its pole as he swept across the field. The windows of the watch tower rising from the roof of the main hangar, like a hut built on the glossy back of a great humpbacked whale, were blurred over and impenetrable, and he could only guess at the eyes through the blind glass which were watching him. The red flowers with bowed heads looked black, the yellow gray, in the gardens beyond the hangars as his sagging wings swept over, and the big ornamental mirror ball which on bright days glinted and reflected to the sparkle of the sun was tarnished with fog now, and the gravel paths that he had laid out were sodden, and rain beat on the river.

Five hundred feet high above the river he heeled his stalling wings around. Shooting his wings down, he cut his motor off. The clouds above him poured in great sudden slathers as he went swooping back low across the hangar roofs beside the watch tower for his landing. Lightning crashed. The air rocked. For an instant the world was a pale white flame. He threw his flooded goggles up above his eyes. With head bent down overside and shielded by his arm he saw the mirroring pools on the field rush up with blurred speed close below him. He jazzed his throttle, dropped his tail, and took it in a welter of flung muddy spray, on three points with wheels and tail-skid plowing. He swung around with opened throttle, and went plowing to the hangars, furrow-

ing two lines of mud, and in through the great doors that stood open for him.

"How does it look, captain?"

Pavian took off his helmet from his black curls, and shook his powerful body like a dog as he stood up. There were drops on his broad forehead, on the lashes of his gray deadly eyes.

"Wet," he said laconically. "The war's off for the day. After you've battened down you can all call it a holiday. Crank up all the rolling stock on the station and pile down to the village to give the *bistros* a little business."

They answered with cheers and a babble of laughter, crowding around as he swung to ground. One dirty undersized grease monkey, half lost in a pair of voluminous hand-me-down dungarees which were rolled back from his wrists and up around his ankles like a twelve-year-old boy dressed in his father's clothes, pressed forward on a wooden leg amidst the rest and seized the great Tornado captain's hand, bending his oil-stained face and shaven head an instant to kiss it.

"What's the matter now, Kosselmark?" said Pavian, snatching his hand away with a laugh half of amusement, half of irritation. "Have you a girl in the village that you can't keep away from, and does she mean that much to you?"

"No, lord," the boy flamed beneath the dirt on his thin hollow face. "I was just expressing my gladness that our great Pavian has returned all right."

"Afraid of the lightning for me, boy?" jeered Pavian. "Afraid of a little rain?"

The grease monkey flushed again.

"I was on duty in the watch tower, lord," he said. "And for twenty minutes we watched your wings rocking up into the storm after you had taken off, and then the lightning crashed white and blinding all around you, high in the middle of the clouds. It was like the blast of a fiery furnace that seemed to hit your plane direct, lord, and when it faded you were gone."

"We kept searching with our binoculars at all windows, trying to pick you up again," the little grease monkey went on, still breathing frightened, with bright anxious eyes upon his grim captain, "but we

couldn't. Only the lightning and the clouds. And I heard the officer in charge of tower watch saying that no man could ride it, that you must have crashed. He told us that he had read in the cards many months ago that Captain Pavian was going to be killed by lightning that day, though he hadn't wanted to say anything about it. Only now, he said, it had happened. And he had all of us in the tower sick and scared till we heard your ship again coming down."

"Thunder weather and hell's lightning!" said Pavian with contempt. "Who was the half-witted *Narr* in charge of tower watch who made that dismal croak! Does he call himself a Tornado ace? Reading my fate in cards and ouija boards, like a mumbling old woman."

"It was Captain Carlos Roma, lord, the officer who has been sent us from Intelligence. And he is half gypsy."

"He's half tipsy," said Pavian grimly, "not to speak of being three-quarters bats. He lost me a ship yesterday evening trying to waylay that flibbertigibbet Yankee DeHaviland on its way home that is suspected of taking signals from Tonnerre, and he came within an ace of losing my own crate that he had borrowed without permission. Taken in by that ancient dead-man trick that smells of moldy cheese. He is a fool. Don't let him worry you again, ever, boy," he added more gently and gravely, not unmindful of the humble *Soldat's* solicitude for him. "Don't watch and wait for me again, ever. There's no man in the Tornado who has orders to do that. My fate lies in the inscrutable hands of God, like that of all of us, from our divine kaiser down. And in God's time the fate of all of us will be made manifest, but not one jot before. Therefore we go and fight the lightning with a brave heart, resting ourselves in God's hand. What is the matter with you, boy? You must have been out in the storm. You've got rain in your eyes."

"Yes, lord, rain. I opened my window in the tower, watching for you, and the rain came in my eyes. I am glad that you are safely back. But, oh, my captain, be careful! Be careful!"

"Careful! Do you dare to advise Pa-

vian to be careful!"

"I am sorry, lord."

"My compliments to Captain Carlos Roma, and request him to report to me at once!"

BUT the small furtive dark-faced officer of the Intelligence who had arrived yesterday from the great *Kriegsnachrichtenant* headquarters in Berlin was already climbing down the vertical ladder against the hangar wall, from the railed catwalk high up beneath the cambered roof, like a spider down a thread. He jumped the last three rungs to the ground. Lean and stoop-shouldered, he stared at Max Pavian with his black eyes that were like the eyes of a lemur, the fox-monkey. He laid a finger along his nose, and jerked his head significantly toward the glassed-off hangar office.

Pavian felt a sudden beat and diastole of his heart. There was some news of her, the gilt-haired spy, the French spy, Jacqueline Tonnerre, she who had betrayed him, she who had betrayed all Germany, and who must be found, and must die. His jaw muscles were strong and white. He followed Roma in the office, and closed the door.

"Well?"

"The situation is this, captain," said the furtive man, seating himself at the desk across from Pavian. "This lone black Spad which is believed to be Lenoir's, last of the old Vultures, has been observed on various dawnings far over our lines. In general he has followed the same course. Appearing just at sun-up, somewhere a mile or two east of your field here, and a mile or two high, he will take a course north over Outres, and beyond that toward Brix and Longwy. Also the same for the lone Seahorse DeHaviland, Yankee manned by that old pair of 10th Marines, which we believe to be Norman and Sergeant Crow whom your squadron has much reason to remember. The Yankee plane will appear in this vicinity, though to the west, just at sunset, and follow the same course. We have laid traps for both of them, but they are old hands as cloud-busters. Give them a ten-mile streak of cumulus, and they are lost like rats down

a hole. They always choose days with high and plentiful cloud for that reason, otherwise they would never get away. But not dark and sunless days, either. A high cloud roof, and sunlight on the ground. Since such weather can't be ordered every day, it follows that the appearance of either ship has not been a regular and predictable occurrence. But on the average, two or three times a week. The inference is that somewhere on this course they are picking up messages, containing priceless military information for the enemy, which are being signalled by Jacqueline Tonnerre, the notorious French spy, who has returned among us."

"All that is known," said Pavian, wearily. "Why go over it? I thought you had something new."

"Let us examine the question of her whereabouts again," said Roma furtively, laying a finger on his nose. "Now it is the unmitigated belief of his excellency General Kugelmann, our immortal commander-in-chief, that she is still in the vicinity of his great headquarters at Outres. He cannot forget how last month in her guise of a mulatto kitchen wench, with her soft white skin all painted, she almost poisoned him there, the one thing that he is afraid of in this world, since it is written in the book of his fate that by bullets, shrapnel, steel, or fire he shall never die.

"That is Kugelmann's belief, captain, that she's at Outres, waiting her chance to poison him again, and the hunt is on hot for her there. Yet there's a strong and reasonable belief back in *Kriegsnachrichtenant* headquarters in Berlin that she may more likely be found at the great division point at Longwy now, reporting our troop units passing through, their strength and their condition. It would be a strategic place for her to be. And still a third theory is that she's back at Brix again, where for some time she lingered in her own guise of the debonair young Folies dancer during your own tenure there, before her relations with the French *espionage centrale* were known. And I think, if I recall rightly, that there was a bit of a romance there at Brix, wasn't there, ha, ha! The invulnerable Jacqueline, the cold unman-moved Jacqueline, developing a weak-

ness in that lovely heart of hers for our great Pavian, our fierce Tornado king. As I recall—"

"Go on!" said Pavian grimly. "What have you to say! Where is the woman?"

"Ha, ha! Do not look so angry, captain. Your face is all white. There is no suspicion of our great Pavian because for a while he loved her, though she was a daughter of France. He did not know what she was, and it was all quite reasonable. The time was May. Lilacs and apple blossoms. Sweet woodlands to wander through, and wild flowers to pluck. Myself, from the pictures I have seen of her—that high kick she does—"

"Stop rubbing your dirty finger on your greasy nose!" snarled Pavian.

"Eh?"

"Go on! What is the situation in the hunt for her! Have her approximate whereabouts been located? I have a passion for seeing her found! I cannot rest because of it! In *Donnerwetter's* name, can't you understand my feelings for her? She secreted messages in my own plane to be read by the Allies when Norck had downed me! She used me as the instrument of betraying Germany! His excellency may not accuse me, the *Kriegsnachrichtenamt* may not accuse me, but I accuse myself! I wake up in the night remembering her soft treacherous voice still, and the feel of her arms around me. Whispering, 'Max, *ami, cheri, coeur! Je t'aime, je t'adore, pour toi je suspire, baise moi, coeur!*' And others of those damned French words of hers that had no meaning to me, but that I can remember yet! Ha, though I did not know that she was a spy, it is true, still I knew that she was a daughter of France, and that all of them have wanton hearts. And she betrayed me to Norck, for the glory of her damned France! I cannot rest! I cannot rest! Till she is found."

He ran a hand through his thick curls. His cloud-gray eyes burned on Roma haggardly.

"In the night," he whispered, "the sound of her voice still! Where is she?"

"THAT," said the furtive man, nodding, laying his finger again beside

his nose, "is something that we will know definitely soon. Artzybasheff, once of the Russian Eagles, has agreed on certain terms to get the information for us, and we may expect it dropped across the lines now any day."

"Artzybasheff!" said Pavian heavily. "The Golden Eagle! He was a great man once. When I was a beginner on the eastern front he was the king of them all. When can he deliver?"

"As soon as possible. Any day. He was going to first try working through Lenoir. I saw him on my last trip to Paris, two weeks ago. If he hasn't got it to us in another week, I'll have to make the long trip again. Norway to Spain to England, and then over. I like Paris, but I find the travel tedious. However, I think that before it's necessary Artzybasheff will come through. In the meantime our search shan't slacken. As I say, Outres and Longwy seem the most likely probabilities, while Brix is still a good guess. But Fuminix itself is not to be ignored. It's where these ships appear to begin their course."

Pavian nodded.

"His excellency suggested the possibility that she might be around here," he said. "Naturally, I've been on the alert, as much as possible."

"It's the least likely," said Roma thoughtfully, rubbing his nose. "Some place along the middle of the route these receiving planes have been taking would seem to be most probable. If they are getting their signals from around here, then the rest of their long course deeper into our territory is just camouflage to protect her. It would seem an elaborate and dangerous system of precaution to take. Still, there's no doubt that either one of them would go to the limit to protect her. Which doesn't make Artzybasheff's work too easy. What have you done, may I ask, in regard to locating her around Fuminix?"

"The obvious things. We've listened for a weak wireless broadcast from the neighborhood, assuming that Lenoir's Spad could be rigged with all the paraphernalia of a receiving set. But nothing doing in that way. I've told my men to keep their eyes open for her. It's a standing order

with them whenever they go to the village, like this afternoon. We have personnel replacements all the time, but still there are a good half of them left, probably, pilots and men, who can remember her from Brix two months ago. Of course, what that is worth no man can say, since she showed herself at Outres later as such a damned actress and so clever at disguises. Still, it's something to have everyone keeping his eyes open. I haven't, it is true, conducted a house to house search of the farmhouses in the countryside around. For one thing, it would take more men than I've got. For another, they're all French around here, and though they don't give us any trouble they don't give us any help. They would hide her, and lie themselves blue as only Frogs can. They'd probably let you hang them up by their thumbs all night before they'd betray her. I haven't any stomach for that."

"Any house to house search would be impossible," agreed Roma. "There are too many cellars and attics, ravines, caves, woods, and haypiles. Each house would know you were coming hours before you reached there, and she'd have ample time to hide if in the neighborhood. Kugelmann's found out the difficulty of the house to house method around Outres. That's why he's so certain she's still there. The only thing is to try to locate her signals. Not wireless. How about suspicious arrangements of washings on a line, or smoke puffs sent from chimneys, or specific numbers of ducks and hens in a farm-yard? The possibilities, I admit, of course, are legion."

"I've watched for signals, of course," stated Pavian. "Every time the black French Spad or the Seahorse Yankee has been in the air every plane of ours that was in the surrounding sky has gone tearing after them, and we've sent ships rocketing up from the field. But the signals would stop or would be removed at the first sign of us, assuming they were coming from this territory. That's all a big part of her game, you may be sure, whenever she is, to watch what we have in the air. I've done what I could think of. Is there anything to suggest?"

Carlos Roma rolled his glistening lemur

eyes at the ceiling thoughtfully. He shook his head.

"No, but Fuminix still remains a possibility," he said.

VI

PAVIAN went out, slamming the door behind him. The big cavernous hangar was deserted. The big doors were closed. The whopping gang had gone, flying men and kiwis, to the last one of them not on necessary guard duty, down to Fuminix village and what life and adventures were afforded there. Max Pavian had heard the tenders, motorcycles, lorries, popping off to the last available car while he sat talking with Roma, and the cheerful shouting voices receding out the gates.

The little grease monkey heard Pavian's step behind him in the hangar darkness, and turned around, his hand full of yellow lubricant. His bright dark glance looked at the great pale-eyed ace anxiously. A flush came on his thin face beneath the oil. He took a hobbling wooden step, wiping the back of his hand across his cheekbones and nose, but only causing the oil to be smeared more widely.

"Anything wrong, Kosselmark?"

"No, lord. I was just going over it, though, to make sure. I love to take care of it."

"You ought to have gone down to the village with the rest."

"I'm happy here."

"Damn it, we all need rest," said Pavian. "Relaxation. Binges. Joy. You've got to play, wide and high. It's part of the business of being a soldier. Haven't you ever been drunk, Kosselmark? Haven't you a French girl?"

"No, lord."

"You should have," said Pavian darkly. "How old are you, boy—sixteen?"

"Nineteen, lord."

"You're a liar, I think," said Pavian. "No razor has yet touched your cheek. Your voice has barely changed. But if you could get by the recruiting officers with a lie or a bribe, that's not up to me. We're taking them young. Younger and younger all the time. Yes, at sixteen even in the front lines they're shouldering their rifles

now for Kugelmann. So many of them. So many of them," he repeated broodingly. "So many of you. Your faces come, fresh and eager and young, and grow older and harder, and die. Of those who started with me in old Squadron Seventy on the Russian border four years ago, how many of them are left? How many? Why, I alone. But still it's the Tornado, the great Tornado. Perhaps the greatest Tornado we've ever known, at this moment. So what do the faces matter? Let them come, and go."

"You are the Tornado, lord," said the little grease monkey huskily. "Without you the rest of us are nothing. We all know that, lord."

"Nonsense," said Pavian, shaking his head. "Nonsense. The man is nothing. Only the squadron counts. The faces come, and grow hard and proud and fierce, and then one day you see them no more, they have swallowed Yankee lead, they are replaced by others. But the Tornado goes on forever. I miscalled you, didn't I, boy? So many faces. You're not Kosselmark, of course. You're Rindersohn."

"No, lord, I'm Funk. Rindersohn is the one who came in the detachment before me. The tall thin one. Kosselmark, why, that's the name of our squadron adjutant, lord. His honor Captain Kosselmark."

"Yes, of course. He used to be my grease monkey once, but captain now."

Pavian smiled faintly.

"Kosselmark's the adjutant, of course," he mused. "That's why he looked so queerly at me today when I called him Hegemann. But Hegemann is dead. Yes, the great Ernst Hegemann, adjutant and number one man of Pavian's Tornado. Shot down by the Yankee devil-dogs at the head of his patrol. Shot from a thousand feet away. Who would have thought such a thing possible? The great immortal Ernst. Certainly he would never have thought it, but it happened. It's Captain Kosselmark now. I shall have to remember not to call him Hegemann again."

"I'm sorry," he said, with a tired smile. "Rindersohn, Funk. You're the one with the leg. I'll remember you again. How did you lose it, boy?"

The grease monkey shifted uncomfort-

ably. Pavian's gray eyes seemed full of cloudy ghosts. Remote. Not seeing him. It was uncomfortable.

"Shot off at the knee, lord," he answered the question huskily. "Vimy Ridge."

"Ach," said Pavian, "I was there! I was there in the sky. It was there that I brought down their great almighty Captain Ball, and knew for the first time that I did not have my equal in the air. Against the British. Up at Vimy Ridge. So you served there, boy. Yes, perhaps you are older than I thought. Too bad about the leg. But that makes nothing. There is Kosselmark who has the four fingers of his left hand off. Lost them in a propeller when he first joined the squadron. But a special harness on the stick has fixed him up. Those things can be arranged, if a man has the heart and eye. I suppose that you will be wanting to fly some day, boy."

"Lord, I had never thought to go so high," the thin-faced grease monkey stammered, flushing.

"You will have your chance," Pavian nodded broodingly. "You will have your chance. Hegemann, why, the great Ernst Hegemann was only a dirty cub grease monkey like you once. Terrified of the air. Called me Honorable. Jumped and sucked his breath in and let his eyes bulge out every time I spoke to him. But I gave him his chance, and he became the great Hegemann, with his record that is written in letters of immortal gold within the halls of death. Yes, he became great, did Hegemann. There was a time he got to, before he died, when he thought he was better than I."

"I would never think that, lord."

"That is well. For it was Hegemann's fierce overweening confidence which brought him down. To assume that he was better than any other man. To assume he would not die."

"I am not confident, lord."

"No need to call me lord, Kosselmark," said Pavian.

HE did not notice his mistake, repeated. His head was filled with the memory of old ghosts, in the gray pouring rain today. He had seen them in the

white lightning flashes of the high storm clouds amidst which his ship had tossed. Hegemann and Bierwort, Kleimann, Auslander, Willi Kluntz, and all those great dead Tornado aces. Shot down by Artzybasheff's Golden Eagles in the east. Shot down by Bishop's murdering Camels up at Arras. Shot down by fierce Norck and all his great Vautours, by American Spad and Morse Scout and DeHaviland. All the old ghosts in the white lightning flash. And he had got them mixed up. Which were alive and which were dead he could not remember.

He opened the hangar side door, and went out, buttoning up his leather coat around his chin, with his black curls bare beneath the rain. The deluge was steady. The sky was all a tossing gray. He walked aimlessly toward deserted barracks, but halfway there he turned, and went toward the gates.

"Turn out the guard!" bawled the sentry at the gates springing out of his little house with rifle at present.

"Never mind the guard," said Pavian. "I am going out for a little while."

"Your car has gone, sir."

"Never mind the car. I'm walking. The rain refreshes me."

Pavian breathed deep, sucking the damp air in, the smells of fields and woods and cow byres. The rain beat on his bare head. It runneled down his square stern jaws and crept beneath his collar. Every now and again he wiped the fringe of it from his eyes. He came trudging in half a mile to a fork in the road. The right led on to Fuminix village, but the left he had never taken. It was muddier and narrower even than the main road, and it went up over a hill slope. He took it, deep in meditation, climbing.

It was somewhere around here that the great Rene Norck had been brought down, he thought. In old days when he and his squadron had been flying out of Brix, when this had been French territory. Norck of the great Vultures, Spads 79th. who had been Jacqueline Tonnerre's first lover. Norck, to whom she had betrayed him, Pavian, and who had set a trap for him. But he had wiggled out of that, though hurt, with honors.

Hereabouts great Norck had fallen, and many generations might come upon this earth, and many rains beat on many graves, but great Norck would never be forgotten. There had been a foeman, worthy of Pavian's steel! There was a name with which, through ages, would be linked the name of Pavian. And boys unborn, generations undreamed, would linger at Norck's monument with bowed heads, saying, "Here lies Norck, who once disabled Pavian in duel ship to ship! Brought down himself by the Tornado! And though Pavian was badly wounded when he met Norck, still Norck was as great a man."

HE paused, beyond the crest of the hill, at a gate in front of a farmhouse which had suddenly appeared in view. Thatched roof, smoldering smoke from the chimney, tiny windows in the old stone walls dark and washed by rain. There were a pig-pen, cow-barn, covered hayricks out behind. At the side of the house a well with a great well-sweep, the mossy bucket resting on the well's edge, might have invited cold refreshment of thirst on brighter days. A bent and lean figure of a man in a blue smock and wooden sabots was chopping wood in the open woodshed behind the house, with dull thunks of his swinging ax. Pavian opened the gate.

The peasant paused, half bent in the stroke, as Pavian approached. He looked around with pale bleached eyes in a brown wrinkled face. He looked as old as a hundred years. He looked as old as death. With his pallid eyes upon the great Tornado captain.

"It was somewhere around here," said Pavian heavily, "that Captain Rene Norck of the French *Vautours* was brought down and was buried—wasn't it? I knew him once. I have come to see his grave."

"Who?"

"Norck! Captain Rene Norck of the Vultures, the 79th. Your France's greatest ace."

The old peasant shrugged.

"Him," he said. "Oh, yes, I remember him. They left him for me to bury. But it was planting time. I threw him out back of the pig-pens in the weed patch."

Pavian's jaw muscles were white. His

cloudy eyes had lightning in them.

"You left Norck," he said, "unmarked! To rot within a weed patch!"

"What was wrong with that?" the old peasant said defensively, cowering back. "He'd rot in a rose bed, wouldn't he, the same? My lord, the things that you fighting men get wild about! I threw a couple of spadefuls of earth over him. What more could you expect when I was paid nothing for it? But I saved his clothes and cuff links. They're for sale, if it's souvenirs you're looking for. There was one of your men from the flying field here only a week ago, and he bought the Frenchman's watch for two hundred francs. Gold, with a picture of a girl inside it. No offense intended, lord, if the Frenchman was a friend of yours. He was a great man, was he? Well, you're all alike to me, you fighting men. I have my work to do."

There was murder in Pavian's face and heart. Dead Norck to be scorned by a dog like this! He would wring the miserable scarecrow's neck. But he subsided in a moment. There was no use in it.

No use in anything.

"Would you like to go out to the weed patch, lord? With your help, if you insist, we could move a stone over it and asking nothing for my time."

Pavian shook his head. "Never mind," he said.

Stones do no good, anyway.

He turned away. The flash of a woman's red skirt caught his eye, flicking out of sight as he turned his eyes toward the farmhouse kitchen door. The flash of that skirt! A thought struck him. The intuition he had had of her nearness, though he had not confessed it to Roma. He was too frightened for a moment to breathe. He wiped the rain from his face, and spoke quietly after a long moment.

"You have a woman here?" he said.

"What man doesn't have a woman?" said the old peasant, still defensively.

"Would you be objecting to that, too? What would I be chopping wood for, without a woman? Heh, heh, heh!" he laughed. "I guess that even to you fighting men they are one thing more important than war." As I sweat, so do you fight. For women."

"There is a French spy believed to be hiding in the vicinity," said Pavian quietly. "A woman, lovely and treacherous as hell. With black eyes, a complexion like a tea-rose, and golden hair. Her name Jacqueline Tonnerre. It would not go well with you, old man, if you were hiding her."

"Maybe she's my old woman," said the peasant with a cackle. "Search her, and if you find the old lady's as good as that, I'll give you a peck of potatoes, heh, heh, heh!"

"You are insolent for a Frenchman," said Pavian coldly. "The most of you have sense enough at least to mind your manners in the presence of your masters. Be warned! I am a mild man, but I carry the commission of the emperor. And there are limits within which a Frenchman must conduct himself with me."

"French! Do I look like a dog of a Frenchman!" the ancient peasant spat. "My name is Johannes Wolff to you, lord, and I am as German as you are. It's a plain name, Wolff, not honored by any titles, but you'll find none better and sounder for a thousand years. And you may be commissioned by the emperor, but I know my rights. Yes, as German as you are," he muttered, "and maybe more so. For I have heard it said that the illustrious Captain Pavian does not know the name of his own father, which thank God has never yet been said of any Wolff."

Pavian flushed darkly.

"Why are you here—why do you own French land—if you're German then?" he said.

"My son was killed on this field in '71," said the old peasant simply, with moisture sprouting in his pallid eyes. "My only son. Theodore Wolff, lance corporal of the East Pomeranian 5th Corps. When Moltke had his headquarters at Fuminix, after the battle of Sedan. I bought the farm. I buried my daughter here beside him. And here I wait."

"Wait for what?"

"Wait," said the old man. "Wait! For what do we all wait? Wait for him to come riding by, and stop at my door, and ask me for a drink! They all do, when they see the well. And he, too, will presently."

"Ah," said Pavian, "death! Well, he

comes riding by on all roads sooner or later, old man, and stops, demanding our hospitality. So I don't doubt that he'll come for you, though you've waited a long time. An there are no young lovely women in this neighborhood at all?"

"Only Marghuerita, lord, that's all."

"Marghuerita!" said Pavian, his heart leaping in excitement. "Who is she? You didn't mention her before! Has she big dark eyes?"

"Oh, dark eyes!"

"Has she gold hair?"

"Oh, gold hair!"

"Has she a way of laughing? A way when her fingers touch the pulse upon your wrist you grow all hot and cold and forget what you are? Has she a soft voice, whispering little words that have no meaning, in them, like sunlight dancing on water?"

"Oh, a soft voice, lord!" said the old peasant. "A soft, soft voice. So soft it can scarce be heard. And the touch of her hand upon your arm, yes, lord, in the night, turning you all hot and cold, and to hear her whisper—"

The tears ran down his wrinkled old mummy face.

"Where is she!" demanded Pavian, seizing his arm. "Where is this Marghuerita?"

"She is my daughter, lord," said the old peasant. "She was young and lovely once. Young and lovely enough to attract even the great Kugelmann when he was young, though he was a connoisseur of lovely women, and ordinarily preferred the French. A great beauty, I assure you, lord. I can take you to the grave where forty-seven years ago I buried her beside her brother, if it is loveliness that you are looking for. Though perhaps she has changed under her sod."

He picked up his ax again, while Pavian stared at him in silence. Pavian turned. He went out from beneath the shelter of the shed into the rain, and back toward the road. The thumping blows of the old peasant's ax followed him down the muddy road as he slogged away beneath the rain and flashing lightning, till it was lost in the crash of thunders in the air around him.

VII

AS the early summer dawn began to glimmer through the window in non-coms' barracks beside him. Okie Crow half lifted himself on his bunk with a muttered exclamation. He lay a moment on his elbows, gummy-eyed, confused with nightmares, trying to remember what had awakened him.

Reveille hadn't yet sounded. All around him in the dimness he saw inert figures lying on the iron two-decker bunks, snoring through the last hour of sleep which is the sweetest. The poker table at which they had been playing stud up till after midnight, beneath the incessant rain drumming on the roof, still stood littered with cards. Here and there, where the roof had leaked, splotches of dampness strained the floor.

It was Okie's first sleepy impression that the rain which had fallen for a day and a night was still continuing, introducing another day of barracks lounging and sleeping in. All dim gray outdoors. From the hangars he heard the snort and cough of a Liberty being turned over. It was that sound which had awakened him. Yawning, he peered down over the edge of his bunk. In the tier below him the blankets of Heeb Faxon, sergeant mechanic of the skipper's patrol, were empty, and here and there he saw now other empty bunks where the early morning duty detail had been roused out, perhaps an hour ago.

"Poor suckers," he yawned. "Rain. . ."

He rumbled his yellow thatch, settling back on his mattress again with heavy eyes. But suddenly through the window beside him then the red dawn burst, and he could see great motionless mountains of painted thunderheads in the east, and the top of the sky was pale and clear, with fading stars.

It was wing weather. A Liberty caught and roared. And then another. Dawn patrol. The flying flag was up. The skipper's flight was getting ready to take off, after thirty hours of storm. Okie opened his gummy eyes again, trying to think of what he was trying to think of. Major Graunt's patrol heading across the lines. Across above krautland. What about it? Suddenly with an oath the young Seahorse gunner

kicked free of his blankets, swinging himself to the floor. He remembered, now.

Colonel Artzybasheff, the visiting Russian!

"That damned leatherfaced—"

He was savagely awake now. He heard the motors roaring with swelling throttles as he pulled on breeches and shirt in fumbling haste. Thrusting his feet into shoes without pausing to lace them, snatching up puttees and blouse to finish his dressing on the run, he rushed out into the staccato-shattered dawn beneath the red clouds burning.

Five ships were on the line across the field, with hammering rocker arms and spinning clubs. Pilots and gunners stood around in a little knot, while in the cockpits mechanics listened to the engine song. He was still in time. It wasn't Lieutenant Bonney, the regular gunner, standing beside the skipper's ship with the stock little forms of Orlando Graunt. Okie recognized the tall lean form, the tired eyes, the wrinkled porcelain face, of Colonel Serge Artzybasheff of the Imperial Russian armies from fifty yards away. All set, in flying suit and helmet, to hop across the lines with Graunt! The thing that he had been waiting around the squadron since night before last to do.

"Wait a minute, major!"

Okie's face was pale, his lungs were burning, his heart roared in his ears. Tripping on his shoe laces he went floundering toward the churning ships. Artzybasheff hopping across the lines! Yet why not? And what was there to stop him?

"Wait, major!"

HEEB FAXON had climbed down out of the skipper's ship, and Graunt had his foot in the stirrup step, swinging in. His stretched cheeks, his bulging eyes, glared around at Okie with snorting disapprobation.

"Well?"

"Wait! Are you going across the lines, sir?"

"Do you think I'm one of these original imitation ten-cent aces who hop to Paris when they hop, and come back and write a log full of Fokker victories that no one else ever saw?" snarled the overstuffed

little Trojan. "It's four o'clock. Button up your pants, Crow. The rain is over, and the war is going on. Come on Serge!"

"Wait, major!" Okie stammered. "Let me go with you instead of the Colonel!"

He had swung up into his ship, grunting. With some fumbling haste, still keeping his lean ironic smile, the Russian followed. Pilots and gunners of the other ships were swinging up into their cockpits along the line. Okie seized the cockpit rim beside Graunt, moistening his dry lips.

"Wait!" he said desperately. "I warn you you'd better—"

"I had better! What the hell do you think you are, Crow, talking to me like that?"

"Wait!"

Okie looked around him desperately. His eyes lit on Inky Norman, coming down the line of burbling ships with gun strapped on hip and bandage-wrapped right hand slung against his breast. Inky had the O. D. duty. His eyes were red and tired. "Inky, don't let him—"

"What's the matter?"

"Yes, what the devil is the matter with you, Crow?" roared Orlando Graunt.

Still Okie could not reply. He could not admit to Inky that he had sung. That he had told the Russian the location of the lost French dancer, the hunted spy. Serge Artzybasheff had belted himself in the gunner's pit. Pulling forth his crested gold cigaret case, he extracted a striped cigaret and lit it with an air of amusement.

"I think, Orlando," he drawled, "that your gallant specimen of an old original here suspects I am—well. I don't know quite what. Perhaps a Hun in disguise. Maybe even the notorious and ill-starred Captain Roma of the Hun espionage himself. Or perhaps the Kaiser's maiden aunt. Isn't it something like that, Crow?"

"You—well—," Okie choked.

"Right," said Artzybasheff with his lean smile, before Okie could reply. "The poor chap's been following me around like a faithful bulldog ever since I arrived at your field, major. It was he, in fact, I suspected at the time, who was eavesdropping under your hut windows last night while we were discussing the girls in Peking over a bottle, and who ran, you remember,

when I called your attention to the fact that someone was there and you threw the window up. Oh, don't be too hard on him. He meant well, doubtless. It was just amusing."

Graunt's teeth gleamed white beneath his waxed spike mustache.

"So it was you, Crow!"

Okie's face burned. It was true that he had tried to get some further lead on the Russian last night, though with no result except a pair of wet feet prowling out in the rain. He had thought that he had got away unrecognized. But that supernally clever Muscovite had smelled him or guessed him, he realized now, and with shrewed restraint had failed to name him at the time. By saving the broadside to hurl against him now, Artzybasheff had thrown him on the defense before he could utter any accusation, if indeed he had any coherent one to utter.

"Damn it, Crow!" yelled the Seahorse skipper with rage. "Consider yourself under arrest! Take charge of him, O. D., and I'll handle him when I come down! Of all the damned sneaking peeping Toms—"

The Russian opened his cigaret case again and laughed quietly, proffering it down overside to where Okie clung grimly to the cockpit rim.

"Fumez?" he said.

Which is French for "Smoke?" But the way he said it, with quiet dry emphasis, it sounded like Fuminix, the word he had wormed out of Okie. And whatever doubts Okie had had before were dispelled now with that bland gesture and that dry mocking word.

"By God, you are!" he shouted, choked with tears and helplessness and hate. "If you get the word to the Huns where she is, if anything happens to that girl, by God, I'll—"

But his shout was drowned in the hurricane roar of Liberties, as Orlando Graunt lifted his hand in signal to the other ships on the line and rammed his own throttle wide. Their blocks had been kicked away. Okie was jerked from his feet as the ship he was clinging to shot forward. He let go for his life, somersaulting head over heels on the grass, blasted by sand and pebbles hurled back in the wind stream.

With a rocket bellow they were speeding across the field. They rose zooming into the air before Okie had got his feet beneath him. Goggled, peering down from the rear cockpit, the Russian was looking down with his pale porcelain grin as Graunt's ship banked back over the hangars, and his grin was like a death's head in the sky.

Triumphant, mocking. . . .

INKY NORMAN had run up to him, helping him, bruised and shaken, to his feet.

"What's the matter with you, devil-dog?"

"He's a spy!" choked Okie. "He's a damned spy, Ink!"

"You told me that before, and I've been watching him. But I've seen no proof of it."

"There never will be proof, he's too smart for that! But he's a filthy spy for all his gold ailerons!" Okie reiterated wildly. "He came here to worm Jacqueline's location out of us, and nothing else but. And now he's hoping to pass it to the Huns! Have them break out the 33, Ink! We'll stop him in the air, if we can catch him!"

"You're crazy," said Inky. "He's Artzybasheff. He's got a big name. He's all right. He's a little too damned curious, I'll admit that, and he'll try to pump you. But curiosity is the sign of a healthy mind. Suppose he is a spy, anyway, what harm can he do? What can he have learned? "unless you were fool enough to spill him any information yourself, cowboy."

Okie could not answer for a moment. "He knows," he managed to articulate. "Knows where she is and that we've been contacting her. And Lenoir too."

The tall young pilot's eyes were black upon him.

"I'll never think the same of you again, you dumb hick," Inky said with a curled lip, with quiet fury. "If you believed in your hunch, why didn't you follow it? That's what God gives us hunches for, damn you! Why didn't you tell me he'd sucked you like a lemon? You still haven't proven to me that it means anything. But we've got to warn her somehow that her

location is out. And you're under arrest here till the skipper gets back, and I'm stuck with the O. D. till eight bells, or else it's a G. C. M. for us for deserting post of duty in time of war."

"It'll be a G. C. M. for murder if we can catch that Russky!" said Okie. "Let them give us a court and hang us. We're breaking out the 33, Heeb!" he shouted to Heeb Faxon "Yes, Inky Norman's orders! Didn't you hear them? On the double—let's get her into the air with all she's got!"

"You and the lieutenant going Fokker-potting, big wind?" said Faxon, running up.

"DH-potting!" muttered Okie beneath his breath with burning eyes. "This sky's going to see something it never saw before! That Russky is going to be stopped if it costs three Seahorse ships! Let's get going!"

A mile above the field the five DH's of Graunt's patrol were banking into formation, on glinting orange wings that caught the red dawn fire. Still reveille had not blown. High up, miles high in the east beyond the Marne, Okie saw the tiny dot of a lone plane as he ran to get the DH out, appearing from the vast motionless thunderheads above Hunland that were all suffused with sunrise. Too high too remote, to determine its kind, but coming from the east, from Fuminix! If it was one of Pavian's Fokkers by appointment, to which Artzybasheff would signal Four! Not one, not two not three but four. The fourth guess, Fuminix, the drome of the Tornado! That's where the gold-haired spy is hiding. Get her Huns!

A signal a gesture to a Hun plane flying a quarter of a half mile away was all that was needed if, the Hun was watching for the signal. Four tracer bullets. The signal four made with arms spread briefly but meaningfully in semaphore. There were a dozen ways that the Russian could pass the information, without being observed or betraying himself, to a Hun crate in the sky, if that's what that black highflying speck was. Yet even a contacting Fokker was not necessary. A message wrapped around a gun-wrench or other object and

dropped unseen above some spot where German troops were thick, in the good old-fashioned way by which countless hundreds of spy messages had been dropped before this would be sufficient.

At Fuminix at the drome of the Tornado itself there's your spy, Huns!

The one word was all they needed to find her. And the Russian's part in her betrayal could never be proved against him. Not even if bigger and more important men than a non-commissioned gunner of gyrenes should come later to suspect him. No proof, nothing definite, nothing.

"I'm going to kill that Russky son!" raved Okie. "He's not going to get away with it if they hang me!"

Their ship had been rushed out onto the line. But she was cold with thirty hours of idleness and rainy weather. Okie spun her club with sweating speed. Hearing her choke and miss. Choke and miss again. Eastward in the paling sky, climbing steadily higher toward the dawn the five ships of Graunt's patrol in wedge-shaped flight went droning away up the valley of the Marne, five thousand feet and more high now, and growing smaller, alone in the sky except for that high black dot approaching from the east above them.

"Spad!" cried Inky. "Black French Spad. It's Lenoir! He's heading here from Fuminix! He's—something bad's happened! He's picked up a last message from her that they've closed in on her already it looks like. . . ."

VIII

AT a mile high Major Orlando Graunt's patrol had been converging into formation behind him. The doughty little skipper of the Seahorses cut his switch a moment. He leaned his head back to Artzybasheff in the whining silence.

"We'll fly up the Marne! Cross over the lines into Krautland this side of Bar-le-Duc!" he shouted. "We may catch some enemy night-bombers sneaking back home that way and give them a run for their money! It's Tornado country across, the lines up there though. Suit you?"

"To Fuminix?"

"Not quite that far this trip!" Graunt shouted, shaking his head. "That would be a little too hot for one formation, even us. You won't need to go that far to smell Hun tracer smoke, colonel, and that's what you want."

Touching Graunt's shoulder, the Russian pointed warningly ahead as they went roaring upward in the climb. High in the sky, coming from the great dawn and the immense mountains of cumulus in the east, there was that black lone ship. It came toward the climbing American patrol as they headed up the Marne, full throttle across the upper sky. It was almost overhead, and a mile above them, when again the Seahorse skipper felt the clutch of the Russian's hand digging into his shoulder bone, shaking him and there was fear in the grip.

"Watch out, watch out, major!" Artzybasheff was screaming warningly in his ear.

Graunt shook his head. "French Spad!" he shouted. "You've lost your eye. He's not a Hun! Black Spad! Lenoir! *L'Eclair Noir*! The Black Lightning of the old Vultures! You'll sometimes see him in the dawn coming back like that from hell and gone over in the east."

How much of what he had shouted the Russian had caught he didn't know. But certainly Artzybasheff could see for him—the Russian's hand lay tense with fear and self now that it was a Spad, no enemy. Still death upon his shoulder.

Above them the black Spad had nosed down. It came down full throttle, in a vertical power dive, toward their climbing patrol. Three miles a minute down the sky, while they plowed on. The circle of its flashing club came like a cannonball of sunlight red in the dawn. Its high smoke-stack Hispano laid a thin blue streak back behind it like the smoke that lightnings leave.

Orlando Graunt tightened his grip on his stick. He barged on steadily, looking up at that diving ship above him with profanity. For five long seconds it seemed motionless a black meteor poised above them, but it was coming. In five seconds more it grew like an express train down the track. *Wheeyoom!* it scream rose above the Lib-

erty roar, cutting the thin high air. There was nothing to do but to keep straight on, for God knew which way the crazy French fool would twist it in the last split second. *Yoom!* Graunt clutched his stick with murder in his heart, and his heart in his lungs, as the black streak shot past in front of his bow, hitting two hundred miles a minute, missing collision by a split hands breadth.

A flash of the small French pilot's brown upturned face, goggled eyes and silver-wired hand upon his stick so quick and keen. A flash of black stub wings, of streaking fuselage with the black vulture flying, the vulture for which there was no squadron, all the rest of the great ships which it once had flown with destroyed by Pavian, it alone left in the skies. A flash of its tri-colored tail streaking below so close it seemed to nick their rushing landing-gear then it was gone.

Florent Lenoir of the old Vultures—there he went. With his wired hands, his shattered spine that was held erect in iron braces his cool green glance that was still as quick as lightning, his look of a choir boy out of school. Playing tag. Showing off. Major Orlando Graunt's eyes were dizzy and his heart was pounding in long exhausted throbs and beats. He ground his back teeth together, swearing.

"One of the old timers! Son of a louse! I'd hook the show-off idiot and smash hell out of him if it wouldn't spoil a good ship!"

He looked back. Artzybasheff's lean patrician face was lined and white. The Russian was reaching for his cigaret case in a mechanical gesture, which he recalled only when he saw Graunt's eyes turned back at him. He shook his head, smiling sickishly. He touched two fingers to his lips, and threw a kiss below.

Far behind them down the steep sky lanes, the black Spad was shooting on. Headed for the Seahorse field in the distance, so it seemed, across the glinting Marne. For an instant a vague wonderment rose in Orlando Graunt's mind as to whether the wounded French ace hadn't been trying to signal him. Signal him to return. But that, he knew, was foolish.

Yet in the loneliness of the high sky and the cloud wreaths they were running into, the bellicose little Seahorse skipper would almost have welcomed German ships as companions, if not friends. For the first time in his life, and for some reason that was inexplicable to him, he was touched with fear.

And in the cockpit behind him the Russian, he saw, was afraid. Stiff with fright, with stony eyes, and a face deep lined, as white as death.

THEY were above the war now, far east of Chateau-Thierry beyond the Marne. Whether over German territory, or terrain still being held by French and Yanks, Orlando Graunt wasn't certain. Somewhere, probably, between the two, above that shifting front. Behind him Artzybasheff was leaning overside now, looking down with a strained face.

Orlando Graunt decided at last that the Spad ace had intended to signal him to return. They were drifting into more clouds. He waggled his wings to the spread-out ships behind him, signaling them to turn back. The cloud enwrapped him and his ship once more then, the freezing gray cloud that looked so red outside in the sunrise, but was so cold and dark within, as he banked himself to turn back.

Artzybasheff's talon claws dug into his shoulder. The Seahorse skipper rolled his eyes around.

"On! On!" the Russian mouthed.

Gesturing with his bony hand.

Orlando Graunt shook his head. He cut his throttle. He leaned back in the deafened silence. They went spiraling on one bent wing.

"Turning back!" he shouted. "Sorry to disappoint you! But I think Lenoir was signaling!"

"On! Over the lines! Stretch your nose out! Keep gliding!"

"Why, you—" Graunt glared at him.

"Straighten out! Stretch out your glide! Open that throttle and turn around, and you'll die! We're turning ourselves over to the Huns!"

Artzybasheff had a gun in his hand. A big American Colt with its hammer cocked

back and its safety catch sliding off beneath his thumb. He dug its cold muzzle into the back of Graunt's neck. And though the foaming little Seahorse skipper was a brave man, there is something in the feel of cold steel on the back of the neck that way, prodding deep in, which can melt a spine of iron. Sitting helpless, remembering how easily a man's head can be blown off with one trigger squeeze. . . .

"You're crazy!" he croaked, stiff-necked. "What's got into you, colonel?"

They had come out of the cloud in a flat stalling glide. He had straightened his controls in obedience to the wild Russians's pointed finger. Looking around him with jellied eyeballs he saw the other ships of his patrol, turned back at his signal, piquing back down the valley of the Marne, already two and three miles away within the minute and going farther. With that crazed Muscovite jamming the gun into his frozen neck he was gliding flatly, a mile for each thousand feet of altitude, deeper into Hunland. . . .

No question it was Hunland now as dawn paled the smoky earth below. Kugelmann's gray swarming thousands were everywhere down there. Twelve thousand feet high and sliding down the sky helplessly. Orlando Graunt chewed his teeth and raved. To be taken alive like a pigeon and eat German prison slops for the remainder of the war. That insane Russian! He had gone air-screwy. Somehow it seemed to the rabid Seahorse skipper feeling that cold iron jab his neck vertebrae that it was all Okie Crow's fault for having persuaded him to hop the crazy Muscovite. His mind was whirling.

"On! On!"

"You're crazy!" Graunt yelled furiously. "By God, I won't do it!"

He slammed his throttle open with the word. He keeled his wings over in a steep climbing flipper turn as the big engine roared defiantly.

"You damned crack-brain—"

Crash! Pain split his skull. His eyes were filled with a great blind flashing light, and his hand slipped from the stick, his feet from the rudder bar. He slumped in every muscle like a dead sheep.

THE slam of the pistol barrel in the Russian's hand had landed at the base of the Seahorse skipper's hard crash helmet, back of his ear. It hadn't knocked consciousness out of him, unfortunately. It had just paralyzed him. He heard the roar of his looping engine like the roar of the Milky Way. The pilotless DH's nose whirling, with a grinding howl. Orlando went howling up. It wobbled, sagged, whipped over in a spin. Down roaring, Graunt's head rolled on his shoulders. His nerveless limbs flopped around. He was thrown against his belt like a sack of wheat. And still his eyes were horribly open, his brain awake.

He was aware of the frenzied Russian behind him, desperately trying to insert the emergency stick. Probably Artzybasheff had not meant to bang him quite so hard. Not knock him out. Now they were in the same boat. With pain-wracked skull and whirling eyes he was dimly aware of the thousands of feet dropping away on the altimeter dial the whirling ground approaching. They were going to a smash, he and the crazy terrified Russian, with engine roaring like all sixty.

So he thought. . . .

His head snapped. He felt the whirling world straightened out. With a great roar they were rushing with level wings across the low sky, two thousand feet or less high. The crazed Golden Eagle of the Czar in the rear cockpit had got the emergency stick connected up at last, had got his feet on the rear rudder bar, and had neutralized out of the spin. Artzybasheff was in control of the ship, for the moment at least, and was pointing them toward a landing on a Hun field a mile ahead—!"

Orlando Graunt felt nerve force creeping slowly back into his limbs. Like the tingling of a foot that has been asleep. He moved his hands, trying to grasp the stick again, but there was no strength in him yet. He screeched profanity in a steady stream to the wild man behind him. But Artzybasheff couldn't even hear him. It didn't do any good.

They were far back of the ragged front now. Plowing across the bottom of the sky

full throttle toward that German drome. They must be up near Outres and Kugelmann's great headquarters there. Guns smoked below. Graunt saw a formation of half a dozen ghost-gray Hun ships; they looked like Albatrosses, riding high in the dawn sky, perhaps two miles up. They were nosing over now. They were coming down cautiously.

The paralysis had oozed from Orlando Graunt's sprawling limbs. His head still felt split wide open, but his muscles were beginning to respond. Cursing, he straightened in his seat and grabbed the controls again, wrestling with all the strength of arm and shoulder to seize mastery of them from the lunatic Russian behind him. As he did so, a hundred feet to left of him a flash of orange wings, a streak of green fuselage, came looping up. Across the rushing air distance a gun muzzle swung at him from the rear cockpit of that zooming ship, at a distance that could not miss.

And he knew that ship.

"You're crazy!" he howled. "You're all crazy! You can't do that!"

A DeHaviland, one of his own Seahorses. The K-33, of course. Inky Norman's lean air-burned face glared from the pilot's cockpit, right hand in a sling. Okie Crow's square-jawed hairy-browed ape face loomed in the gunner's pit, behind the ring-sights of that leveled Lewis. They had come looping up from underneath. They must have been hedgehopping for miles across the face of Hunland to nail him when the crazed Russky had brought him spinning down. Following him hell-bent to murder him.

"You're all crazy!" he howled. "All you damned aborigines! Shoot me, and you'll hang for it! The whole damned pack of you are bugs, only you don't know it!"

OLD originals! Early birds! They were all as mad as red-eyed bats, was a suspicion which Orlando Graunt had entertained not too secretly for a long time, and now he was sure of it. Artzybasheff, Lenoir, that pair of godless sons looping up across from him, they were all cut from the same pattern, all air-screwy and lunatic as fiends. They had missed too many

boats. They had taken the rabbit punch too often. And they had all ganged together for some senseless and lunatic reason to murder him this hop, he felt with fury.

"You'll hang—" he screeched.

Tac-tac! the Lewis gun smoked twice, deliberately, and Orlando Graunt threw his head and chunky body forward, feeling the wind of death rip past his ear. He had got the controls away from the Russian in that instant. He snapped his ship up in a howling zoom. He skidded around like a leaf in a gale, and flippered over before a shot cracked again.

He hadn't been hit, by God's mercy, and that pair of dumb old original wing-throwers would never get him in their sights again before he had burned them out of the sky. He was Orlando Graunt, he was the skipper of the Seahorse 10th, and he knew every trick which lay in a DH as a man knows the tricks of a dog he's brought up from a pup. He knew tricks those old originals had never seen before and hadn't even heard of. He zoomed with a rocket roar, mad as a bear. He flippered, climbing like a pinwheel. On his ear he shot around, and the 33 was a quarter mile away, turning in dumb circles, looking for him. Screeching soundlessly, with bristled mustache, gleaming teeth, he dived at it, reaching for his gun trip.

THE Russian had given him the controls without resistance now, and he was putting his howling ship through the book from Aileron to Zigzag. He came down roaring at them full throttle, pinning them in his gun-sights, and saw the crouched form of Okie Crow swing muzzle back at him. All right—it was going to be gun to gun. And he felt sorry for it. He hated to waste a good ship. But it was only mercy to that pair of air-bats to wipe them out and end the misery of their lunacy.

From five hundred feet-away the Lewis tracers smoked at him. They were zinging through his struts. He almost smelled them. He was three hundred feet away and coming like a rocket on her curling tail when Norman brought his ship up into a split-ess straight in front of him, and

Okie Crow swirled his gun and racketed away with intense absorption over Graunt's upper left aileron.

The bursting Seahorse skipper looked behind, to see where that hail was going. Three of the ghost-gray Albatrosses from the roof had come streaking down on his tail while he had been whirlwinding to get in position on Norman's ship. One of the three was going down for ground now with whirling tail and an aileron tearing loose. The other two were heeling away like bats in a hurricane while Okie's tracers smoked at them across Graunt's wing. In the sky overhead three more of them sailed buzzing, but a good mile high, and with no immediate attention, it was quite obvious, of making themselves any closer and warmer.

Orlando Graunt twisted his head farther around, looking at Artzybasheff. He saw now why the Russian had let go the controls at once and without more argument. Artzybasheff was sprawling almost half out of the gunner's cockpit, hanging head and shoulders down over his swivel ring, and held in only by his belt as Graunt heeled the ship over and bored up, climbing with all he had. And there was a great red stain spreading down the back of the Russian's collar and on his neck beneath his helmet.

Head swaying and swinging. Those gray Albatrosses were skimming off, diminishing down the sky. Orlando Graunt was considerably dazed still. But the thought occurred to his splitting brain that Crow hadn't been shooting at him, after all, but at the Russian. For he had an idea that if Crow had been trying to get him, from a distance so close as that, he would have been got. He took deep breaths, skidding his ship around furiously. He wanted to fight somebody, but there was nothing to fight. With great abruptness he laid on his controls and wing-slipped as rapid-fire A. A. three-pounders from the direction of the Hun field came blamming around him.

Above him the 33 was fishtailing and slipping out of those Hun bursts like an anxious mother swallow. The pair of old originals seemed to be waiting for him, and they seemed to want to go home. That

seemed to Orlando Garunt the best thing to do in the circumstances, so he did.

REVEILLE had sounded when the two DH's came winging back over their field at Lourton-val, bow to tail. There was a black Spad on the line in front of the hangars, and Graunt went taxiing for it when he had touched ground. Behind him Inky Norman had brought his own ship down, and the two of them went jazing up to the line together.

Colonel Serge Artzybasheff of the Imperial Russian Armies, the Golden Eagle of the East, was not dead when they hauled him out of his cockpit. No more than dazed, and partially revived by the wind-rush of the long flight home. Awareness and acuteness and coolness were beginning to return to him. He stumbled and held his feet, facing Graunt, Inky and the blond Seahorse gunner warily but coolly.

"He would live!" said Okie with choked fury. "I think too much of good rope to think of it's being wasted on him. I'm glad that they use rifles on the likes of him."

The Russian's wrinkled face was pale. Blood on his hand where he had wiped the back of his neck convulsively. He got out a handkerchief and scrubbed his palm with it. He fumbled for his monocle with a gesture of attempted calmness, and even managed to insert it in his eye.

"What was the matter with you, Crow?" he said in his dry half amused voice. "What the devil! I went out of my head, I'll admit. Grabbed the controls from your skipper here, as well as I can remember. It was one of these blue funks that happens to you. So long since I've been in the air. But that was no reason to try to kill me."

"Damn you—" said Okie with blazing fury. "I wish to God I had plugged you through the liver! You've dropped the word to the Huns already—it's written in your face."

"I don't understand you at all. Are you meaning to insinuate that I'm a spy, communicating with the enemy?" demanded the Russian in his loftiest voice, drawing his lean frame up to a height. "Major! My dear Graunt! Upon my soul, I apologize

to you for my temporary loss of sanity. It is an old air-shock which recurs at intervals with me, and of which I suppose I should have warned you. But really, my dear sir, I'm Artzybasheff, after all. And my name and record are too proud—too proud, I say—to be challenged by one of your unwashed and illiterate enlisted men. Well, really—"

"Don't hit him, Okie," warned Inky Norman.

"The dirty lying spy!" choked Okie. "Why didn't I shoot him dead, and take my trial for murder? Now he'll bluff out of it, with that damned line of high talk of his, and his name and his monocle."

"Really, my dear major, to let this man continue to accuse me of being a spy—"

"I don't say that myself," denied Orlando Graunt hastily. "I'd not say that about any man, Artzybasheff. Certainly not about one I knew. I'd like to kick your head in for pulling that gun on me. But maybe it might have happened to anyone. Going air-crazy. I don't know."

"They can't prove that I'm a spy!" reiterated Artzybasheff with pale tight lips, with his cool grin. "No man alive can prove it." He played at being confident.

But even as he continued with the bluff he must have known that it was hopeless. He must have known it, by keen and desperate intuition, at the time when he saw Florent Lenoir, the Black Lightning, zooming around Graunt's ship in the sky, on Lenoir's way back from Fuminix. That was the reason he had made his desperate attempt to force a landing in Hunland. Without the intuition, the dreadful realization that he had been found out, escape would not have been necessary. Still he tried to bluff it out with his lordly Muscovite air. But his lips stiffened and his scornful patrician face grew pale as he beheld Florent Lenoir climbing down out of the black Spad nearby, and approaching.

THE little French ace had remained sitting in his ship when he had landed, a few minutes after Inky Norman and Okie had taken off in pursuit of Artzybasheff. He had passed them in the air a half mile, in fact, with a flick of his head in salute. Landing and taxiing up

to the Yankee hangars, he had remained hunched in his cockpit, smoking cigaret after cigaret, waiting for Graunt's patrol to return with patience.

Now, however, with a snap of his fingers Lenoir had summoned two of the Yankee hangar gang to help him out. He came from his ship, supported by their arms. Florent Lenoir, the Black Lightning of the Spads. Small and delicate as a girl, with his thin tearose-tinted face, his great green eyes, his slender graceful killer's hands, his downy mustache that made him look even younger and less mature than if he had worn none at all. He had once, Orlando Graunt had heard the story, escaped after being downed in Hunlan with the help of Jacqueline Tonnerre, shaving off that silly mustache and using her girl's clothing. But there was no man who dared to laugh at him because of that masquerade, or make a joke about it, or even refer to it in his presence. For he was Florent Lenoir, the last of the great Vultures, the *Vautours*, the terrible birds of Death, the immortal and everlasting Spads 79th of Rene Norck. And himself a greater man in his heyday than Norck himself, perhaps, if the living can ever be compared with the dead.

That delicate right hand of his that was little more than a contraption of wire and bone fragments and twisted shreds of flesh now, held so delicately against his breast. That spine of his bound rigidly in braces. Those broken knees of his that would never walk again without support. Pavian of the great Tornado had not sent him down to be buried behind a pig-pen. He was alive, the last of the Vultures. But perhaps he would have changed places gladly with Rene Norck.

He came with shambling knees between the devildog mechanics who supported him. With his quiet grave look he lifted his left hand and saluted Orlando Graunt. Caporal Lenoir—he wanted no greater title. He saluted all the majors, colonels, and sub-lieutenants that he met. And if there was laughter behind his cool green eyes when he did so, it was a secret and solitary pleasure of mockery that he never confessed.

"Thinking that his excellency Colonel

Serge Artzybasheff, the former Golden Eagle of the Imperial Russian armies, might be visiting your squadron, major," he said with formality, in his thin clear voice, "I turned my course this way, and had the pleasure of confirming that he was in the sky with you as I passed by. His excellency the colonel has also honored the 97th Spads, from whose field I fly, with frequent visits of late weeks, and me particularly with his charming conversation. And relying on your graciousness and hospitality, major, I took this opportunity of dropping down to await your return, to renew our acquaintance."

"What do you want, Caporal Lenoir?" said the Russian, with stiff lips.

"I want nothing," said Lenoir. "I," he repeated more loudly, "want nothing! But you, did you get what you tried to pump me for? Did you get it from these marines?"

He shuffled a half step forward, with panther eyes.

"Did you get it?"

"I don't know what you mean," blustered the Russian, wiping his hand over his bloody neck again. "If you man to insinuate that I am a spy—There is nothing that can be proved!" he choked. "There is no harm in asking questions. I am Artzybasheff. You can prove nothing! You can prove—"

Lenoir held up his hand.

"I have returned," he said in his thin clear voice, "I have returned from Fuminix. A last report flashed from J-4-T, the dancer Jacqueline Tonnerre, who is a spy of France. Roma of the Hun Intelligence is at Fuminix. She overheard Roma telling Pavian that Colonel Serge Artzybasheff, once the Golden Eagle of the Imperial Russian Armies, had been hired by the Huns to find out her location and report it. There is the testimony of Roma, via J-4-T. It is proof enough. It is proof enough in the martial courts of France. And it is proof enough in hell among the damned.

"And you found it out, her location," he said, while his green eyes blazed and his voice grew louder and more terrible with death. "You found it out from these marines, and you reported it to the Huns! I

spit upon them, who betrayed her to you! I spit upon you, who betrayed her to the Huns and Kugelmann! I spit upon you both!"

He stood facing them, with blazing eyes from Artzybasheff to Okie and Inky Norman.

"My ship, messieurs!" he said to the men supporting him, and heeled away.

Okie Crow brought up his knuckles after a moment, and wiped his face. But Artzybasheff stood without moving, like a corpse upright on his feet. And he had lived through the uttermost of shame and terror and defilement already. Not death itself could touch him any more. Okie almost felt sorry for him as Orlando Graunt called the guards to put irons upon the Golden Eagle's wrists.

IX

"**A**T Fuminix!" snarled Kugelmann, sucking in his withered cheeks, with a burning glare. "So the damned she witch has been located at last! At Fuminix!"

"So the message says, excellency," his young aide replied, standing at Kugelmann's bedside by the light of the night lamp. "It was picked up an hour ago down beyond the Silver Albatross field, where that pair of American DeHavillands were seen performing their inexplicable battle maneuvers yesterday morning. Colonel Artzybasheff was apparently forced to drop it overside in haste, without time to make sure that there were troops below to pick it up, and it fell in open field. It was only just discovered. I knew that your excellency would want to know at once that her location has been unearthed, even at the cost of interrupting your sleep."

"I thought you were shaking me to tell me that France had given up the sponge, which I don't count on them doing for another fortnight yet," muttered Kugelmann. "Or that the Yankee divisions on the Marne had thrown down their rifles and run, which I don't count on for another week. Still, this is news in a way as pleasant. Of course you did the proper thing in waking me, Gratchen. What is the hour?"

"Half past two, excellency."

"Two hours and a quarter till sunrise, which is one of the times when she is believed to dispatch her signals, as I understand."

"That is the conclusion that the Intelligence has arrived at by putting two and two together, excellency."

Kugelmann swung his long hairy shanks over the edge of his bed. He was in his nightshirt. His dyed black hair lay thin and rumpled over his great dome of head. His white mustaches, long and wiry as the whiskers of a great Siberian tiger, were spread out wide on either side of his lean wrinkled cheeks. Ordinarily horizontal, like the handlebars of a bicycle, those proud facial adornments of his were now disheveled by sleep, so that one pointed up and the other down, giving his fierce face a somewhat comical and idiotic expression. He slipped his feet into Turkish slippers. He reached for his teeth in the water-glass on the table beside his bed.

"Found!" he said, inserting the porcelain. "This is good news. Only Paris could be sweeter."

Kugelmann. His excellency Lieutenant-general Maximilian Eitelhorn von Kugelmann. Order of the Star of Prussia, Commander of the Double Cordon. Knight Companion of the Sword of Teutoberg. Most Exalted of the Red Eagle. Kugelmann, the great conqueror of Galicia and Russian Poland. The hammerhead of the great German thrusts at the British up at Arras. The victor of Ypres and the terrible Road of Widows. Great Kugelmann of the great almighty Prussian Guards.

But still he had to keep his teeth in a water glass.

"Fuminix!" he said. "*Durch Gott*, that's a surprise. I've had the ghastly feeling that she was in Outres still, all along, though we've probed every hole and harrow for her, and not a rat had escaped. The way she crept into my kitchen here to poison me! Strawberries as red as her lips. Coffee as black as her eyes. Who knew when she would repeat her devilish attempt again? I haven't been able to eat or sleep in peace like a comfortable Christian for weeks, I tell you, Gratchen. Seeing her around me everywhere. Seeing that look of her damned innocent lying eyes

and the smooth sleek way she has of walking, the dancer's way, with that movement of her hips, and the soft sound of her voice, and all of that. Thinking of her! Seeing her everywhere! Shadows! By God, there have been times when I thought that even you might be she, Gratchen!"

"Me, excellency?" Lieutenant Oscar Gratchen laughed. "I thought she was a woman, and a pretty one."

"Yes, but she'll be found as a man now, be certain of it," said Kugelmann. "She has exhausted all other disguises. It would not be too hard. There are super-patriotic women, as we know, who have managed to slip into some service outfit and remain for many months undiscovered, by bribing the examining doctors and using a little watchfulness and ingenuity. It has always been considered a heroic thing when such cases of imposture have come to light. Most probable that she herself has turned to man's disguise. For a while, therefore, as I say, even you have not been beyond my suspicion, Gratchen. You're dainty enough," he growled, "to be a woman anyway."

"Me, excellency?" The young lieutenant flushed, straightening his choker collar around his handsome neck. "But I assure you, sir—"

"Yes," said Kugelmann darkly, "I suspected the whole pack of you lily-handed headquarters beauties! But you're not the French vixen, anyway, Gratchen. You've got too much height, in the first place. And she's not here, as we know now, thanks to Artzybasheff. Fuminix. That shortens the search. Has Captain Pavian been informed?"

"Not yet, excellency."

"Hiding there! It seemed the least likely place. We find her at the last guess as always. Still, she has a penchant for air squadrons and for flying men, I should have remembered it. Isn't there some officer of Intelligence at the Tornado field, detailed there for the sole purpose of locating her, on the off chance she might be there? What's his name—Captain Roma! Yes, I know his reputation, and a shrewd one he's supposed to be, too. Still the French vixen seems to have eluded him

as if he weren't there."

"She seems to be a clever one, excellency."

"Clever," nodded Kugelmann, half closing his glittering black eyes. "Ah, yes. The first time I ever caught her, I remember I was sympathetic with her. Fatherly and kind. If I may say so, willing to be affectionate to her. She seemed so helpless, guileless, and young. But the little devil took advantage of me to escape, and lived later to nearly bring my death. She has a way with her. It is possible that Captain Roma may have spotted her, but she may have proved a morsel too appetizing for him to resist. I don't trust these men of the Intelligence through and through. They are too used to not letting their right hand know what their left hand does. Both sides of the game. Telephone Captain Pavian at Fuminix secretly, Gratchen. Don't tell him what's in the wind, as his switchboard man might be listening in. But request him to report here at once."

HE hopped into his breeches when his tall rosy-cheeked aide had gone. He drew on his boots, the diamond rings on his lean fingers. He drew on tunic, standing in front of the mirror as he buttoned the high choker collar around his scaly neck. He leaned toward the glass, turning up his night lamp bright, while he brushed out his long fierce white mustaches with care. He rubbed smooth the pouches under his fierce black vulture eyes. Pinched color into the skin of his wrinkled cheeks, over his square facial bones.

In the mirror behind him he saw his chief-of-staff, fat jolly pear-faced Major-general Adolph Wie, standing at the door.

"I sometimes wonder if I look as young as I once did, Adolph," he said, a little complainingly. "It is the war. This damned war that the idiot French have persisted in dragging out everlastingly, when we might have been in Paris in '14 just as well as next month. And the week that I lay sick in bed after that she-cat poisoned me. It took something out of me. Perhaps the stomach pumps. See, there is a wrinkle or two. Yes, undeniably. Why, *durch Gott*, here I am, who used to be called Don

Juan Max of the Hussars, and not a woman in the world could resist me. They used to come for miles around as I rode by. Yet one doesn't grow any younger, does one? No, Adolph, I am not so young as I was. And I sometimes wonder if my looks are fading."

"You know that you are a mighty handsome man, excellency," proclaimed Adolph heartily, "and you can't deny it. Why, you're only sixty-seven. Just in the prime of life."

His excellency brushed his long white mustaches, not displeased. There were times when he thought Adolph was nothing better than a fathead. But there were other times, like this, when it seemed to him that Adolph was an extraordinarily shrewd and able man, though he did lisp upon occasion.

"The strength is still there, I'll say that, Adolph," he admitted. "The heart's as young as it ever was. Maybe even a little younger. But what did that damned French vixen call me but a wrinkled toad! Of course, she may have meant it affectionately. These French girls are queer. Still it hurt me. It hurt me, Adolph. *Ach* and then to try to poison me! As if she really meant it."

He picked up his great fur Death's head busby, with the grinning skull upon it and the stiff white bristles like a shaving brush jutting up in front. The face of the skull, indeed, bore a family likeness to his excellency's own, while the feather tuft might have come from his own white whiskers. He put it on his dyed black hair with care. He picked up his red-lined cape, and threw it around his lean shoulders, his medal-covered breast, shivering a little, like a spider trembling on a web.

"Poison!" he said. "They're all poison—women! Don't I know? Thousands of them. But none like her, except one. Marghuerita! *Ach*, long ago. Well, it will soon be time for Pavian. Br-r-r!"

"You're cold excellency?"

"The thought of it gives me the ague still," said Kugelmann, a little hoarsely. "There was a gypsy present at my birth, Adolph. And she prophesied that I would never die in battle, by sword or lance, by shell or rifle lead. I believe there is a

fate, Adolph, on which our lives are founded. That there are great and adamant laws of the universe which we can neither alter nor efface. And in the full confidence of my divine destiny I have gone far in this world, and have braved all things. Brevetted captain at eighteen on the field of battle at Sadowa, for crawling against the Austrian guns alone, and taking their whole battery. Brevetted major and given the Star of Prussia at twenty-two for leading the charge into the French lines at Sedan, and cutting through the lines and cutting off the emperor from escape. Ha, my star of destiny burned bright that day, and on many a day since! There are angels who ride at my right hand, the angels who were with me at my hour of birth. And my faith in the gypsy prophesy has been always unflinching. I have lived in the conviction, Adolph, that I shall never die!"

"You are a young man yet, excellency," said Adolph Wie jollily and comfortably. "Why think about it, anyway?"

"But poison!" said Kugelmann, brooding darkly, fixing Adolph with his glittering black eyes. "That was not in the gypsy's prophesy! I had never thought of it. *Ach*, strawberries as ripe as her lips. So sweet looking, so tempting to eat, but poison! It gives me a sickness yet to think about it. My one Achilles heel."

"Don't worry, excellency," said Adolph comfortably. "You have no more chance of being poisoned than of being shot now. You don't touch a bite or drink a drop that I haven't tasted before you. The endless beers that I have consumed for your sake! The cheeses, truffles, wienerschnitzels, roast piglets, boiled potatoes! It makes my stomach rumble just to think of them."

His fat eyes rolled ecstatically.

"By heaven at which I am looking, and which is immortally above us," he said, "I promise you that your excellency shall never be poisoned again, so long as Adolph Wie has a belly and a mouth to feed it through. The spy is caught, anyway, I understand, and there is no danger of her again. At Fuminix, of all places!"

"Not caught, but located, Adolph," said Kugelmann. "However, thereby the same as in our hand. Fuminix is not so big as

Outres, by any means. We will have her in two hours, thanks to the Russian."

"You have notified my old friend Captain Carlos Roma down there, excellency, to start the hunt for her?"

"By no means," said Kugelmann grimly.

"I don't know your Roma. There have been too many whom her dark glances and soft words have caused to melt. I am taking no chances that Roma might give her warning, if he knows her. I have notified Pavian alone. Her fate concerns him most, and he of all men is the most anxious to see her caught and brought to justice. More than myself even, she has harmed him. For she merely tried to poison me, which is after all a quick death and an unaware one. But him she tried to betray in a sky trap to Norck and all the Vultures, and he will carry the old pain and the lead of those wounds she gave him to his death. Yes, not a day or night without the pain of her for Pavian. We trust no Roma to help us locate her. She is our find and Pavian's."

Lieutenant Hockelwurst, his senior aide, was at the door, buckling on belt and Luger.

"Lieutenant Gratchen said you had sent for me, excellency?"

"Yes, we are proceeding at once to Fuminix in company with Captain Pavian."

OUTSIDE Kugelmann had heard the bark of sentries challenging an arriving car. He buttoned the frogs of his cape around his chin. Followed by his fat chief-of-staff and the two tall young aides with sidearms, he went out into the chilly darkness of the pre-dawn, beneath the great quiet stars.

His great gray Mercedes staff touring car was waiting for him with lamps lit, sergeant-driver and orderly in the front seat, in front of his headquarters door. Pavian's motorcycle dispatch car from Fuminix had drawn up beside it. Unwrapping himself from blankets wrapped around his knees, the broad-shouldered king of the Tornado in his heavy greatcoat was squeezing himself out of the sidecar.

"You came speedily, my son," said Kugelmann with a grim nod, taking the salute from his great and well-loved ace.

"Forty kilometers in twenty minutes, sir," said Pavian quietly. "As fast as anything short of wing could have made it, I think. And the night's a little too black for wings yet. I judged by your aide's urgency the nature of the news. She has been discovered? You want me to identify her! Frankly, sir, I would prefer not to face her again. But if it must be done, it must be done. Where is she?"

"At Fuminix."

"At Fuminix?" said Pavian palely, with a nod. "Yes, I've had that feeling once or twice myself. Very queer. But never a sign of her. We've kept our eyes open, of course. Hiding in some farmer's house, excellency, or in the village itself where my men often go?"

"When we find the place that she's been signaling from, I can give you the answer," said Kugelmann. "For we shall have found her then. And it should not take too long, now that we know the area. But I would say that it's as good a guess as any, Pavian, that she's hidden away at your own drome."

"At my own drome!"

Kugelmann had climbed into the car while he spoke, lean and spidery in his cape and great Death's Head busby. Pavian, following Adolph Wie, started slightly. The Tornado ace's hand tightened on the top of the car door as he settled into his seat beside Kugelmann. He took a deep quiet breath, reflecting over the suggestion. He shook his head.

"Impossible, sir," he said. "I have known her, perhaps better than any other man can claim to have done. There is no need of my denying that at one time, before I knew what she was, I found myself—well, attracted to her. And she made the pretense of being so to me. I know little of women. Of the women of the French style she was my first experience. She fooled me, I will admit, complete. But it is incredible that she could be upon my own drome without my recognizing her. No, not even in man's attire."

He wiped his sweating palms together, though the pre-dawn air was cold.

"No," he said. "Not ever would I forget it!"

The sergeant-driver had opened out the

big swift car. With fat Adolph Wie and Pavian and the great Caesar of the Guards sitting in the rear cushions, and the two stiff-backed young aides in the small tonneau seats, with horn blaring and headlights blazing, the gray Mercedes went jammering with an opened cut-out roar down the night road toward Fuminix.

"I wanted to consult with you, my son," said Kugelmann, "before arriving there in a full blaze of attention. She may be alone and friendless, it is true. But who knows who may be aiding her? Or under what name she may be hiding? Before we get there, it will be well to have an idea in advance of whom she may well turn out to be. Forget her looks. Looks can be altered. They can be altered past all recognition by an actress so clever as she. Forget the voice, too, that soft and singing voice which was made to lure men to their destruction, that voice which you remember pitched only on a certain tone. There are tricks innumerable to alter voices. And though you can't make a crow sing like a canary, still you can make a canary croak like a crow. Black out the looks and voice, therefore. Forget them. Dismiss them from the image in your mind. Only concentrate on this, her dancer's carriage, her smooth and delicate and rippling walk! It is the item which must betray her. Remember how she would rise from a chair, how she would come floating across a room, how she would sink upon a couch, and all of that! Are you concentrating?"

Pavian nodded. His face was pale. His broad forehead was furrowed with a deep frown.

"Does no image of someone at your drome who might be the vixen herself arise in your mind at all at my suggestion? Think, man!"

Pavian sighed. He had closed his black eyes tiredly. His pallid countenance was lined with concentration. Figure after figure passing before his eyes. But all was blank. After a moment he shook his head.

"No one, General," he said. "None at all."

"You haven't been able to dismiss her from your mind as you remember her, that's why," said Kugelmann in irritation. "You are letting yourself still be bemused

and confounded by the memory of that soft voice. Of that gilt hair. Of the touch of her hand upon your breast. Of her heart upon your heart. Dismiss all that at once, I say. Dismiss it!"

Pavian nodded.

"I have tried to, General," he said.

"Very well! It makes no difference, if you've got your mind bogged in a rut. There are other ways to find her, now that we know where she is. The rifles will be too good for her when we catch her," said Kugelmann grimly. "She will die by the rope. And I will have the pleasure of springing the trap beneath her dancing feet myself. Unless you contest for yourself the privilege, remembering the wounds she gave you."

Pavian shook his pale face.

"I contest no privilege or pleasure concerning her," he said. "She is dead to me already, and has been since I learned what she was. Only I desire that she be ended, in whatever way, so that she do no more harm to Germany. There is nothing personal in my feelings toward her, General."

"Nothing personal?"

"Not a thing."

"You are a colder man than I, Pavian, my son," said Kugelmann quietly. "A colder man than I. For the touch of her hand and the look of her eyes and the smell of her hair, and all of that, I cannot dismiss them into the vague limbo of impersonality altogether. Where I have felt, I still feel. Where I have desired, I still desire. And there is a thrill, Pavian, there is an ecstasy, in seeing the pain and death of a thing we love. Yes, a greater and more subtle and more civilized thrill, perhaps, that can be procured in any other way. I am an older man than you. I have lived more years by forty. Yet, you see, my heart is still as warm and young and eager for the great thrills of life as ever. But you are a cold man, Pavian."

"A cold man, yes, excellency," said Pavian.

THE dawn was reddening in the east, though the west was still dark with cloud and stars, when they came rushing across the rumbling wooden bridge over the Barcy toward the drome of the Tor-

nado. Reveille had sounded on the field. Smoke came from the cookhouse. The fire-bright planes of the first patrol were being pushed out of the great hangars onto the line. The flag was being hoisted from the watch-tower. Dew sparkled on the grass. The flowers in the stiff formal German gardens back of the hangars down to the Barcy's shore were lifting up their heads in the dawn wind. And it blew, it blew, the dawn wind blew, out of the east.

And suddenly in that instant as they rolled in through the gates the sun came up. Upon the horizon, elliptical and burning red. A flattened eye, an oval fire. Upon the lip of earth it lay, through the dawn clouds, bright burning. It glinted on the windows of hangar watch-tower and barracks. It glinted on the ornamental mirror globe set in the garden bright with flowers. It picked out and glinted on the whirling club, the invisible wires, of a tiny black plane flying alone in the clouds above the Tornado drome, a little to the east.

"Stop!" roared Kugelmann to the Mercedes' driver, as they went speeding toward the great administration building. "Stop! Turn around! Down to the hangars!"

"Lenoir!" swore Pavian, eyes on the sky. "He was over yesterday! We didn't expect him again! But there the black devil is repeating! He's low not above ten thousand! We'll pull him down this time! Hangars! Step on it! Never mind the road! Across the field!"

"Look!" yelled Kugelmann. "Look Pavian!"

"I see him, sir! By God, we'll get him down this time!"

"Not the French plane, the mirror!" shrieked Kugelmann. "Your mirror globe in the garden behind the hangars! It's glinting in the sunrise, Pavian!"

"Sun reflection, sir! It always does that. It's set unsteady on its base."

"Sun reflection! Code!" foamed Kugelmann, beside himself with rage. "No, no, it may not be apparent. Dot, dot-dot-dot, dot, dot-dot-dot! Meaningless, hey? But read those three dots for a dash, the single dots for dots, and you've got code! Clever! Glinting sun! Code at dawn and sunset to the enemy from your own field! There's your damned French vixen, Pavian!"

"Great God!" said Pavian palely. "Get her, while I get him!"

They had reached the hangars, sliding to a stop on burning tires with a scream of brakes. They threw themselves out before the momentum had stopped, pell-mell, Pavian, the Caesar of the Guards, the two young aides, fat grunting Adolph Wie, sergeant-orderly and driver.

"Close the gates!" shouted Kugelmann rapidly. "Let no man escape! Nor woman, either!"

Five Fokkers had been pulled out on the line. Mechanics were swinging them over desperately, having seen that black Spad in the sky. But their motors were cold. They had not expected Lenoir to repeat today. While Kugelman and his retinue went rushing around the hangars toward the gardens in the rear and the glinting mirror ball, Pavian made for the ships. One of them had caught for a brief minute with a spurt. It died, but it was catching again with a coughing roar as the fierce Tornado king reached its side. It was not his ship, it was the XIX, young Axelstern's, but it was the only one with turning motor, and Pavian sprang to its stirrup step.

"Kick her block away!" he yelled.

A pair of mechanics were screaming at each side of him as he snapped the belt around his middle and opened the gun with a coughing roar.

"Cold, Captain! Her engine was due to come out for overhaul today! She's been missing badly!"

"Kick her away!"

He jammed the throttle wide. Her Benz roared with a bellowing song. She jumped her blocks without waiting for them to be pulled from under. Ungoggled, with whipping black hair, Pavian fastened his broad pale countenance on that black Spad in the sky above as he went streaking across the field with the dawn wind behind him. No time to head around back into it. Taking off down wind toward the great row of black poplars that lined the western sky. Wind and motor rushed him along at a ground speed of a hundred miles. Fleet skimming wheels. The spears of trees ahead. He lifted it. Pavian into the sky!

Kugelmann with Adolph and his aides

had rushed back of the hangars. Dew-wet flowers nodding in the wind, bright red, yellow, orange, and summer blue. Graveled walks and sun-dial and birdhouse and garden seats. The big ornamental mirror-ball upon its concrete pedestal still glistened with seemingly meaningless irrationality dot, dot-dot-dot, dot, dot, dot-dot-dot. But there was no one there.

Adolph Wie paused, wiping his sweating face with frightened laughter, as Kugelmann came to a glaring and bewildered stop. He shook, his head comically, fat Adolph.

"Ghosts, excellency!" he said.

"Where is she!" snarled Kugelmann "She's signaling that damned Spad still!"

"All a mistake, excellency," laughed Adolph. "See, it's only a loose window in the watch-tower which is quivering a little in the wind, and reflecting down the sun upon the ball. A problem of refraction and of—"

"The watch-tower!"

Kugelmann had turned around, quicker than his young aides could follow, on his spider legs that were strong and agile and wiry still for all his nearly seventy years. The watch-tower! With them gasping at his heels he ran back around the hangars, and plunged inside the main one.

"Who's in the watch-tower now? Instantly!"

"Captain Roma, excellency!" frightened mechanics around him stammered.

"Roma!"

"Yes, ex—"

"Up!" yelled Kugelmann. "Up, before the vixen throws herself from the tower and cheats the rope! Up, up! We've got her cornered!"

THERE was the steep vertical ladder built against the hangar wall, leading up to the railed catwalk high beneath the cambered roof, above the network of beams and girders, and a short flight of steps from the center of the catwalk to the open trap-door of the watch-tower at the top. The open trap-door formed a square of light, illuminated by the windows of the tower, high up there in the center of the roof. As Kugelmann grasped the rungs of the ladder, starting to mount,

he saw an officer's peaked cap, a head and pair of shoulders, appear over the edge of the trap-door, bending forward and staring down at him.

"That's Captain Roma, sir!" gasped Adolph Wie. "I met him in Berlin—"

"Roma!" shouted Kugelmann with a great and furious cry. "Stay where you are, Roma! We've got you now!"

But as if galvanized by his shout the bending figure of the man up there in the watch-tower, seemed to catapult forward. His whole torso, his sprawling legs, his clutching arms, came hurtling into view down through the lighted square of door. Head down he dived with flying limbs, while a great hushed groan of horror went up from the dozens of mechanics clustered on the great concrete hangar floor.

That hurtling body struck the catwalk railing edge ten feet below the trap-door, and broke it, crashing through. Clutching at splintered bits of wood and nothingness, it dropped headlong down from the darkness of the roof. A flash of a white face, a screaming cry like the death cry of a horse, and then it was all over. Kugelmann, ten rungs up the ladder, hugged the wall as he heard the thud. He scrambled down again, cursing.

"Cheated us at the last!" he snarled. "The vixen! The damned she witch!"

The self-proclaimed gypsy and fate-reader of the German Intelligence lay sprawled on the concrete floor. The aides were keeping the crowd of frightened mechanics away. The lithe and slender body, the limbs all twisted. The captain's uniform. The head was smashed. The delicate and small-boned hands were clenched upon the mangled breast. With rabid fury, chewing his mustaches, Kugelmann knelt beside that crumpled heap of flesh and bone which had once thought itself so clever, had proclaimed itself so intelligent. The reader of the cards, the gypsy spy. But this was a fate which no cards could show a man. Sudden death, and what came after.

"Why—why—!" foamed Kugelmann, with bursting eyeballs. "It's not the she witch! It's not—no, no!"

"I told you it was Captain Roma, excellency!" gasped Adolph Wie, wiping his

sweating face with a happy grin. "I explained to you. If you had listened—"

"Someone else in the watch tower! Who was on duty with him!" snarled Kugelmann.

Blank faces.

"Generally one or two of the mechanics, sir. We would have to look at the list to see who was on duty—"

But Kugelmann wasn't waiting for the answer. He was darting up the ladder again. This time his aides, Hockelwurst and Gratchen, had beat him to it. They were swarming up with holster flaps unlatched. Gratchen's foot kicked in Kugelmann's face as the Caesar of the Guards grasped the bottom ladder. Hand over hand swiftly they went sprawling up, the three of them, and to the catwalk.

They ran along its sounding boards between the rails, toward the short flight of steps in the center leading up to the trap-door. The splintered section of the rail was still swaying in its broken ends from the impact of that hideous crash. Up the steps toward the open trap-door they went leaping, the aides with their Lugers drawn. But the watch-tower was empty. Telescopes and signal flags, log books, writing stand deserted. No living thing.

"Threw herself out the window after she pushed Roma down through the door!" gasped Hockelwurst. "We'll find her smeared like him on the ground outside, excellency."

"Rope!" snarled Kugelmann.

One of the watch-tower windows was open wide, the window to the west. Kugelmann sprang to it, glaring down. There was a long length of stout signal-flag lanyard tied to the window frame. It extended out and down over the curve of the great cambered roof, over the black crosses painted on the green, down and down beyond the roof edge out of sight. A view of gardens below, flowers, walks, the mirror ball no longer glinting. Red dawn. No one in sight now.

"We'll find out who was here!" snarled Kugelmann. "There must be a record, or someone will remember. Oh, quick! Oh, clever! Quick to kill, and quick to flee. But we have her cornered now, no escape!"

As he started to turn from the window

he was aware of a ragged motor roar, a sound which he should have heard before, but which in his intense absorption of the chase had not registered on him. A ragged wallowing motor roar. And below him, from all over the Tornado grounds, from barracks, shops, and hangars, men running with a great hollow cry.

"Pavian! . . ."

FLEETING down wind with the dawn blast on his tail, full throttle with roaring Benz, Pavian had lifted her steep and swift at those tall black poplar trees. She kicked the ground away, she went streaking into the air, fast blown on the tail wind. He lifted her in a zoom as she shot toward the trees, but she was going too fast, and her cold motor coughed.

"O God! Good God—!" prayed Pavian.

She scraped the tough branches of the topmost poplars with wheels and stalling tail, and beyond were oak and beeches. She plowed clear, but slewed herself around. With choking motor and jammed rudder she went plunging at them again.

He fought desperately. With jammed controls and coughing club. The wall of trees came rushing at him again, and he veered with his aileron, tearing down the edge of them in a welter of flying leaves. One landing wheel was torn off him, he thought. An aileron dangling, and great rips in his wings, and broken struts, and hurtling like a lighting bat. Her motor choked and roared. On one wing she tore clear of the trees. Still he tried to hold her in the air till he could bring her down upon her wing. But beyond his Tornado field on broken ground near the Barcy's shore she died, and the whirling ground was close below, and it came up at him very rapidly, all a blur. He snapped his switch, he reached to snap his belt as he heard the splintering crash and roar, and then he went to sleep. . . .

He opened his eyes, and he was lying on the ground. Heat roared close to him, in waves flickering bright. His tanks had caught, his crashed plane was burning, but he had been flung or had been dragged clear. Someone was bending over him. Someone was cradling his head within an

arm. He heard the frightened shouts and screams and plunging steps of men running from his Tornado field, through the trees. But he was not aware of them, only of the soft voice, sobbing in his ear, the great dark tear-filled eyes above his own.

Why, only a little thin mechanic's face, smeared with streaks and daubs of engine-oil and grime. Close-cropped golden hair, covered with oil, too. But beneath that thickly and artfully laid-on grime the slender lovely face was taking shape before his eyes. Within that huge dirty engine suit, the slender beating bosom of the dancer. Why, she had trimmed those long dark lashes away. She had cut off all that smooth bright sweet gilt hair. Those slender eyebrows had become thick and black with dabs of grease. But those eyes, those tear-filled great black eyes, were unmistakable, looking at them so close this way, and that slender lovely face, that mobile mouth.

"*Ami, amant, cheri, coeur!*" whispering, in a voice no longer hoarse and husky, but soft with sobs, as soft as silk, and crooning a little sobbing song, "*Je t'aime, je t'adore, baise moi, coeur!*"

"Get away!" he muttered between locked teeth. "Get away, you fool!"

But the crashing, shouting crowd was coming up then, all around them. They were lifting him by the shoulders to his feet, while she clung to him and tried to help. He saw Kugelmann leap forward like a tiger, with glaring eyes fixed in stunned certainty upon that tear-stained grease monkey's face, those sobbing shoulders.

"Ah!" he heard Kugelmann shout terribly. "The she witch!"

Pavian stood swaying, pushing away the hands that tried to assist him. A temporary concussion, that was all. No broken bones. His old wounds had not opened. He shook his ringing head to clear it, tight-lipped. He saw the gleaming eyes, filled with sadistic joy, of Kugelmann. Saw Kugelmann with a fierce leap seize that figure, that slender unobtrusive figure in the dirty dungarees. With claws digging deep into her shoulders, iron and fierce with strength.

For a moment Kugelmann held her, glaring close down at her dark frightened

eyes. He took his hand and wiped it hard and swiftly across her face smearing the oil away, feeling the contour of the bones. With a violent gesture he threw her backwards to the ground, stooping beside her with an exclamation of joy. He had jerked up one leg of the baggy dungarees which the French spy wore, exposing her leg to the knee, the slender foot, the shoe with a three-inch length of circular wood fastened to the sole like the bottom of a wooden leg.

"Ah!" he said. "The wooden foot! The limping little grease monkey! It might have fooled even me, along with all the rest! That broke the tell-tale dancer's walk, didn't it? The final touch of the disguise! Ah, clever Jacqueline, more than clever. Cleverer than I gave you credit for! But you could not stop the tears, the tears for Pavian! And it was your tears which must betray you!"

With savage fists he shook her, laughing.

X

SHE was a viper, thought Pavian. A viper, and a poison snake. With her damned treacherous voice, her great soft treacherous eyes. She was the enemy of the Fatherland, of him. She had betrayed him to the Vultures, in that trap, and through his whole life long unto his grave he would bear the pain of those old wounds aching in foul weather. And even beyond the grave he would bear the French steel in him.

He had thought that he never wanted to see her again. Yet he had left his excellency Lieutenant-general Kugelmann maudlin and half drunken alone in his barracks, room, and he was walking toward the guardhouse where she was imprisoned.

Midnight.

He remembered her little gestures, the way she had of moistening her finger-tip and touching it to his ear lobe. The spine-thrilling touch of her lips upon his naked breast-bone one day when he had come down from the air with shirt collar open on his great chest, all covered with sweat and engine oil. He remembered all those dear unforgotten little things when he had first known her, before he had dreamed

she was a spy, in Brix, when all the world was May, and he was the young captain of the Tornado, who had never been beaten in battle, who had never been wounded. Before he had met Rene Norck to drive him down.

"Halt! Who goes? No one shall approach at captain's orders under pain of immediate rifle fire!" cried the sergeant of the sentries at the guardhouse door.

"It's Pavian, Christensen."

He paused at the top of the guardhouse steps, fumbling nervously a moment for his tobacco pouch, though he had no pipe to smoke.

"How goes it, Christensen?" he said, a little thickly.

His voice sounded dim to his own ears.

"Ah!" said the old grizzled sergeant in low tones, bending his face up close. "It is a sad thing, captain! So young, so lovely. If only—"

"If only what?" said Pavian grimly.

"If only," whispered the old sergeant with lips that were almost motionless, intently watching his face, "if only she would find that someone through great carelessness had forgotten to lock the rear guard-house door, which is supposed to be bolted on the outside, but which I have really forgotten to examine! As the captain knows, my wits are old and a little feeble. Yet I have an honorable record, and a slip up like that might be forgiven me, particularly when unintentional! At the worst, they could only break me to a private. If only, with the rear guardhouse door unlocked, the inside guards in front of her cell door came walking down this way, and she should find that the lock of her cell is defective and somewhat sprung, so that a judicious pressure applied at the right place will open it. If only—"

He pulled his watchful face away from Pavian's hard grim eyes, making a swallowing noise in his throat.

"You are a man of heart, captain," he choked. "Otherwise I would not whisper it to you. So young, captain! So young and lovely."

"The French vixen escapes, and you will hang from the tallest poplar tree there at the edge of the field tomorrow in her place," said Pavian grimly. "And to hell

with all your good record and your gray hairs and years!"

"I beg your pardon, captain. I was just joking."

"Save your jokes for the *Fliegende Blaetter*, Christensen. It pays good money for them. There are too few good jokes left in Germany to throw away."

He went down the corridor.

"**H**ALT! Who goes? No one approaches under pain of immediate rifle fire, at captain's orders!" cried the senior of the two sentries on guard before her cell door.

"Pavian, men,"

They walked toward him, porting their rifles.

"Ah!" said the corporal, the senior of them. "It is a terrible thing, captain! When you think that only a few iron bars made by man, stand between her and the sweet lovely life that God has given her. Or at least a running chance for it. Ah, captain, if only—"

"If only?" repeated Pavian grimly.

The corporal ground the rifle in his hands. He leaned upon it, bending forward.

"That cell lock," he whispered. "Well, it is a curious thing that quite a few boys who have been juggled there for minor infractions have been able to slip out for an hour or two and wander down to Fuminix village at night for a little drink of schnapps. Now the captain knows that I have no idea how they do it. So far as I know that lock is perfectly all right. Anything wrong with it has never been called to my attention. I am responsible for enough, God knows. I cannot be responsible for defective workmanship in the lock factory back in Essen, nor for the whole war. Now, it just occurred to me, if only—"

"Well?"

"Well nothing, captain, sir."

"So you've been bitten, too," snarled Pavian. "Give me no more of your if onlies, Kruger! On guard, and on your toes every minute! She might slip out of her cell, and take the running chance for life, might she, and so escape the rope! There will be more than she shot if she

escapes the rope, I promise you that!"

"*Zu Befehl, Herr Hauptmann!* I was just—"

"Joking, I know," said Pavian grimly. "The joke bug is abroad tonight, and it has bitten you. But it speaks with a French voice, and it has black eyes and gilt hair."

He stood before her cell door. She had put on some filmy chiffon woman's gown of absinthe green. A blonde wig like her own smooth gilt hair. And earrings, a dark wine-red cape, and little black dancing shoes. So she had had a cache buried somewhere, and she had been allowed to make use of it. Yes, a touch of rouge on her pale cheeks, too, though her lips needed none of that. And a touch of mascara where her eyelashes had been trimmed off, reestablishing that look of depth and darkness and wonderment which Pavian best associated with her.

She stood there clinging to the bars. She had heard his name as the sentries challenged. She had heard his slow heavy step coming down. She smiled at him with her wistful mouth, her great dark eyes. She touched quick slender fingertips to her hair, on which Pavian's eyes unconsciously lingered.

"Do not feel too badly that I cut it off, Max," she said. "It will grow out in time. Yes, very soon. My hair was always quick growing."

Sudden tears came into her eyes.

"But there will be no time, will there?" she said. "A week, two weeks at most. No, that won't be quite time. Well, that is too bad, I'm sure. I would rather you saw it growing."

Pavian moistened his lips. Tomorrow at dawn. But he could not tell her. She had thought there would be a week or more. Kugelmann had not set the date. He was keeping the suddenness of it for a surprise.

At dawn.

"Mademoiselle Tonnerre," said Pavian with a bow, "accept my farewell, and a renewal of my declaration, once made to you, that you have a lovely face. Indeed, mademoiselle, I will confess that once Pavian loved you very deeply. He wanted once to have the honor of asking you to be his wife. Yes, do not laugh at Pavian, made-

moiselle. He, though base-born and nameless, did once aspire so high."

"But now I go higher," she said quietly. "Oh, high as the poplar trees."

"I regret it, mademoiselle," said Pavian.

"Oh, Pavian!" she said. "Oh, Pavian!"

She clung to the bars, and for a moment she was all shaken. Pavian bit his lips till he tasted blood. With a dogged face he backed away.

"I am sorry," she said quietly, dabbing at her eyes. "It is to be tomorrow?"

He bowed his head.

"I read it in your eyes," she said, with a trembling lip. "There is much that always passed between us without words, wasn't there, Max? And it is so yet. There are bonds which cannot be broken this side of death. And beyond that who can say? If I find an answer, I will come back and tell you. I am sorry that I called the Spads in to set a trap for you. I am sorry for your wounds. But there would be no great hearts, would there, and therefore no love worthy of the name, if we did not have something we regarded as greater than ourselves. For you it has been Germany. For me, France. That is all. You will come and watch me, Max?"

"Jacqueline," he said, "in hell or heaven I shall not see you again."

"Goodbye," she said. "Oh, goodbye, Max."

But he did not answer. He walked out past the silent guards with stony eyes. He walked out beneath the darkness of the great starry night. And he did not stumble, nor did his knees falter, for he was Pavian.

HE walked back to his barracks quarters where sat his Star-of-Prussian excellency, his Double-Cordon excellency, his Cross-of-St. Frederick excellency, Kugelmann, Baron Maximilian Eitelhorn von Kuglemann, the Old Tiger, the great Caesar of the almighty Prussian Guards.

Cousin of the emperor. Cousin of the emperor was drunk. To wit, said Kugelmann, the great almighty.

"I feel sho shorry, sho very, very shorry," said Kugelmann, with maudlin dripping in his voice. "Oh, Pavian, my son, my son, there was never another—"

nozzar—nuvver—woman I loved like her! Jacqueline. None uzzher. Save only one. And she many years dead being the shod. Sho shorry. Sho shorry. I cannot bear to shee her die. I cannot bear it."

He laid his face upon his arms upon the schnapps-spilled table.

Pavian sat down.

"It will soon be over," Pavian said. "Good riddance of bad rubbish."

"Ah, Pavian, you are cold, you are cold!" said Kugelmann in his maudlin tones, shaking his weeping eyes. "So like the image of my youth in so many ways. The image of the son I might have had. But not the warm heart of Kugelmann. No, no! You're cold, you're cold."

"Cold," said Pavian with tight lips. "Yes, I am that, I suppose. It is the way things made me. A man who has had neither father nor mother does not acquire in impressionable youth the habit of warmth. He does not open out. Pavian, the ape! Pavian, what a name! Can you expect a man who's named Max Ape, and jeered at and mocked and held in scorn from the dark days of his earliest memory, to be warm-hearted, Kugelmann? No, I am not like you, though you honor me beyond words by saying so. From the bottom of his cold heart Pavian thanks you, with all respect. But I have not the graces, I have not the education, I have not the money and the fine taste in wines. I was born into the gutter."

But Kugelmann, he realized, had not heard either his thanks or his humility.

"She is like her," whimpered Kugelmann. "That is why it gives me such pain. That is why I cannot bear it. I, who am so warm-hearted that I cannot hurt a female fly. She is like her, isn't she, Pavian?"

"She is like who?" said Pavian.

"Ah, boy your mother."

"You knew my mother?" said Pavian.

Kugelmann reached a lean clawlike hand across the table and gripped him by the wrist.

"Hush!" he whispered with red wandering eyes. "I called her Lorelei. Her name was Marghuerita, but I called her Lorelei. The rest I have forgotten, except that she was very lovely. Oh, perhaps I should have married her. She wanted me to, be-

fore you came. She begged and pled before she died. Oh, Pavian, my son! A strong son for my old age."

He passed a hand across his eyes, and wept. He looked at Pavian with a wandering gaze.

"Hush!" he said. "Oh, hush!"

Pavian sat there a long time in silence while Kugelmann's head dropped on the table. After a while he put down his hand. He pulled away the grip of that clawlike hand upon his wrist, quietly, but with loathing. He arose. He put on his cap. The clock was striking one. He walked back quietly through the starry darkness to the guard house. Sergeant Christensen was still on guard.

"How goes it, sergeant?" he said.

"It goes," said the old sergeant with a sigh.

Pavian gripped him by the shoulder. His clutch was fierce and strong. He bent his black burning eyes, his square hollow face, close up to Christensen.

"If only!" he said, with lips that did not move. "If only! Pass inside the word to Kruger."

Christensen stared at him a moment, then nodded imperceptibly. He resumed his slow careful pacing up and down, hand on his Luger butt, as Pavian faded away.

XI

THROUGH the great moonless blackness she was running, Jacqueline Tonnerre, the spy. Gasping, stumbling over stones, across the furrows of plowed fields, through damp miry ground. Woods. Stone walls suddenly bumping into her. Bushes tearing her dress and stockings. All blackness.

Running in her black dancing slippers, her trailing chiffon gown, her wine-red cape that was black in the blackness. If she was running in circles she hoped not. She knew this terrain by daylight a little. She had been at Fuminix two weeks, at the Tornado drome, and during that time had wandered over various neighboring roads on hours off duty in her uniform of a German soldier, Private-mechanic 2nd Class Otto Funk. Oh, yes, she knew this land a little. The ground where Rene

Norck lay buried. The ground to which the blond young Yankee gunner had brought her safely back from Hunland, when the marines had been at Fuminix and this had been French land. But it all looked unknown, and without landmarks which she could identify, in the darkness now.

Two o'clock, or maybe not quite that. Two hours at the most before daylight began to break. . . .

She had seen the thick-witted German corporal on guard fumbling with the lock of her cell door, as he departed after bringing in to her the night coffee which he had suggested. She had pretended not to watch him, but she had watched. There was some defect in the lock, she had realized presently. When he jarred the palm of his hand beneath it, it would spring open. Several times with great stupidity he had tried to fix it, make it close tight. After three or four attempts he had given it up. With a mute crafty look upon her as he had gone away. Thinking she had not noticed the weak lock. That she would not try it.

In the name of God, with her life at stake!

Then after a little while he and his brother sentry had gone forward along the corridor to have their own coffee with the guard out front. Quietly and with infinite care she had tried the lock as she had seen him do. It sprang for her when she gave it that quick blow!

Silently she had opened her cell door, silently peered out into the corridor. They were up at the front, all of the gray-clad men, drinking coffee, with their backs turned to her, their rifles laid aside, joking and laughing loudly. No way out past them. But the back door! Well, not a chance in a million that it would be unlocked. Or if unlocked, unguarded. But she had crept out, and down to that rear door, that iron forbidding door. And it had been unlocked! No guard outside. Oh, the fools, the simple fools! With her life at stake. Pavian would crucify them for it, as would Kugelmann. But her life at stake! Softly out the door, and running.

Through the night.

No shots had been fired yet back there at the field. They had not discovered her absence. They were still drinking their coffee, doubtless, and laughing. How long before they started after her—*sacre Dieu*, how long?

Blind night, and dark ghostly shapes suddenly appearing, which became, when she reached them, fence-posts, rocks, trees, or bushes. Keeping to no road. Across open country. Running.

There was stubble beneath her feet now, and she was in a field of new cut hay. She smelled the fragrance of it in the still windless summer light. Stacks began to loom here and there around her. She collapsed upon one of them, breathless, prone, breathing in deep gasps, resting in complete exhaustion. She began to throw the sweet mown hay over her, to burrow in. Unless they used dogs, it was a temporary shelter.

A PALE spectral shape came walking slowly toward her through the night. across the hayfield. A shape of a man in ghostly robes. It came close to her. From twenty feet away she saw that it was the figure of an old bent man in a nightshirt, wearing sabots on his feet, feeling his way with a gnarled cane. A French peasant. There was something in his appearance which was familiar. He came toward her like a man in a dream, prodding the ground here and there, flicking up bits of hay, shuffling slowly in his wooden shoes. He came toward the haystack in which she lay cowering, partially concealed. His probing stick knocked her concealment away, thrust into her here and there.

"Ah, Marghuerita," he whispered in his plaintive voice. "I was going out to visit you in your bed. But you have got up from it, I see. Always a wanderer. Always a wanderer. The night air is bad for you, girl."

He had seized her by one shrinking arm, in a hand lean and bony as death. She got up, breathing in soft gasps, shaking the hay away from her.

"Grandfather!" she pled. "Grandfather, you remember me! I came out and bought Rene Norck's watch from you. I

gave you two hundred francs. The German soldier. Grandfather, I am a spy of France! J-4-T, Jacqueline Tonnerre, the dancer of the Folies. They are after me, and my death lies near. Save me, grandfather, for France."

He looked at her with his strange wild eyes, like a man staring in a dream. He had not heard her, she felt. Not heard her at all.

"Come, Margherita, daughter," he said petulantly. "We must have no more of these runnings away. You were always wild. You ran away with the handsome young German officer of Hussars, on his big black horse that matched his fierce eyes. You laughed at your old father. And Albert, poor boy, had much trouble finding you. Now you must stay at home, you must stay at home. And tomorrow I will cut a little switch and switch you. For you have been a bad girl, Margherita, a bad girl. Running off with the handsome young Hussar—"

He was rambling, she realized. A sleep-walker and an old loon both. His head was cracked. But he offered her a refuge. She submitted to the tight clutch of his bony death-grip upon her arm, as he conducted her in the black night across the hayfield, and through a weed patch, and to the cellar door of the darkened farmhouse. He opened the cellar door, still holding her, and they went down.

Yes, yes, a refuge.

"Now Margherita," he said, "now Margherita. You must not sleep out in the damp again, beneath the soil. You must stay here at home and be your father's own good girl again."

He had unlocked a door in the blackness of the cellar, with a key he had found. The lock shrilled and screeched. The door groaned on rusty hinges. It opened, and with a wrench and push she suddenly felt herself thrust in. She stumbled against an opposite wall of stone. The door squeaked; it closed with a slam behind her, as she tried to feel her way along the blind wall, gasping spasmodically. There was the click of the lock, the falling of an iron bar outside. And silence.

Or did she hear him cackling and laughing, outside beyond the thick oak door, that

crazed old man?

She drew back against the damp stone wall, shuddering, gasping. There was the feel of something skittering across her feet. The sound of a faint frightened squeak. The darkness around her was alive with unseen shapes, with dark glowing eyes! Rats! She put her knuckles to her mouth, restraining the impulse to burst out in scream on scream.

Skittering, skittering, skittering! Hush! The rustle, the little squeak! The unseen rodent eyes. She cowered back against the damp stone wall of that black charnel place. Madness! She would go insane.

But better than Hun rope.

XII

THREE THOUSAND feet high their luminous altimeter read, Okie Crow saw, peering beyond Inky Norman's motionless head into the front cockpit. Out in front their hammering Liberty's exhaust shot at times pale violet flames. No other light in all the black invisible world than the luminous instruments and the ghostly hammering flame, and the few stars in the moonless sky—Polaris and the Great Dipper on their left, cut by the staggered outline of their struts.

But on the earth back there a while ago there had been lights, and plenty of them. Stabs of sudden Hun battery spears. Dull flash of great gun puffs, bursting with hollow roars around them in the rocking air. Dim flare of recoiling muzzles down there on the black earth. Again and again, then subsiding, and all black once more.

Okie tapped Inky Norman on the shoulder. He leaned forward, shouting:

"We ought to pick up the Barcy in a few more minutes! Those looked like the guns of Old Reliable guarding the Cloissy dump to me! What do you think?"

Inky shrugged.

All blackness. Their staggered struts against the stars seemed to be without motion. What horizons Inky was seeing to align his wing-tips and rocker-arm on was a mystery to Okie, perhaps to Inky, too. The endless roar of two-hundred horse enveloped them like the roar of black eternity. There was an illusion of unreality,

of timelessness, of softness, in the world around. They seemed to be floating motionless in a dream. But they were roaring through thin air, all the same. A hundred and seven knots, said the Venturi indicator. And there was solid earth below. Waiting for them if they hit.

Two o'clock.

"If she's alive, she'll find some way to signal us!" yelled Okie. "If not, there are going to be plenty krauts going with her to show her the way to the glory-throne! How about it, devildog?"

But Inky couldn't hear him. Empty boasts. No good of that. He cursed himself, who had betrayed her. Inky had not forgiven him. He felt Inky's coldness.

"Christmas!" he prayed. "I hope I die!"

Stab of searchlights again, crash of cloud puffs, flare of quick-recoiling A. A. muzzle slamming rabidly a half a mile below. Sudden smoke filled Okie's nostrils. A great red ball of fire seemed to glow motionless in the night for a moment just beyond their left wing, as if in answer to his prayer, growing and swelling and slowly bursting apart with the timeless slowness of eternity, reaching out to envelop them. Long, long Okie watched it coming. His ears were split apart. The world rocked. He felt their wings swish around, and the bottom of everything seemed to drop away beneath them.

Inky had crossed controls, skidding with a great breathless drag. He cut his gun, hooking around in a half spiral in the thunder-blasted air. The flashes were behind them then. It seemed to Okie that they could not have escaped that terrific burst so close. Yet they had not been hit. They were still roaring. The blackness once again.

Seahorse DeHaviland, the old K-33, with her bomb racks loaded up with American-made Vickers Mark IV's. Vickers belts and Lewis drums heaped on the floor around Inky's and Okie's feet. Pineapples in canvas slings hanging overside around their cockpit coamings. Big navy Colts on hips, to fight it out to the last slug if they were brought down alive and on their feet. Seahorse heading through the blackness with a great sky drome, the loud two-hundred roar of Liberty. Heading

for their old drome at Fuminix which was now the drome of the Tornado. Heading back for that blood-bought field where the most of the old 10th had died, where they lay buried. Themselves the last, the last of the old originals.

It was Okie who picked the dim curved glimmer of the Barcy up first, touching Inky's arm and pointing to it. It was Inky who picked the bend of the river up, as they went roaring a half mile high, trying to find landmarks in that immense blackness. The bend of the river, just this side of the second ford! A quarter mile from the field! They had it then. Okie counted ten, then he felt their wings rock up as Inky banked. If they had guessed right they were sliding over it, the drome of the Tornado!

If the lost French spy was alive, if she was there, there was no signal. So give them hell. In the name of God, and let them go flying out with her to death, Pavian's great Tornado!

Now!

Okie had counted one, two, from Inky's bank. Then he snapped the bomb releases. The air seemed filled with silence as they went roaring on. Then thudda! wham! wham! In the crashing flares that struck the ground behind them Okie saw the great Hun hangars. Wham-wham-wangle! The air rocked and echoes shattered. Searchlight eyes blazed. Shadowy men running. The guns of the Tornado filled the sky with living steel as the Seahorse ship went rushing and wing-slipping over.

"That last one got them!" Okie yelled. "That belted them in the liver!"

A hangar, he thought. A fire was burning. On rushing wings Inky was banking around.

The spurt and flash of churning Benzes down there on the field! The Hun ships were already warmed up. They had been warned of the Yankee ship's approach. Flashing spurts were streaking across the field below as Inky Norman headed back. The Tornado into the air!

"Give them hell, Ink!" yelled Okie.

Glare of the searchlights, blinding them as they went rocking and rushing back. One white finger caught them, focused on

them with great white glaring eye, while the rapid three-pounders crashed like the roll of drums. Inky slipped steep on one ear. The black wind rushed by. He hooked around, reversing. They had lost eight hundred feet, but the blind light had been thrown off. Still the guns crashed. They had unloaded all their eighty-pounders from the racks in that wild, wild rush across. Now Okie began to heave out the pineapples. With both fists, jerking out the pins, and slinging them to right and left down overside. Some of them would hit on open fields and woods, some of them would hit the prim Hun gardens, some the Barcy's banks, and some no doubt would hit the graves behind and rouse up the eternal dead. But some would hit on hangars and barracks, on ships and running men.

"If she goes they go with her!" yelled Okie.

They were roaring over a third time within two minutes, and Okie heaving out the last of what they had, when from the Hun watch tower and from a point on the field opposite, the lights which had been blotted out suddenly blazed on again simultaneously, and caught them in a cross beam. They were speared full in the blinding light. With his arm across his eyes Inky keeled steep as the guns blammed. Crash! And that had got her through the wing. A flinched strut. Okie swung his gun down, rattling at those great blind glaring eyes, while Inky whipped them over in a fast tight power spin, playing dead man.

Invisible shapes came hurtling from above as the guns below signed off. The Huns above could see their whirling wings against the lights. It wasn't Roma leading them this time. They weren't fooled by Inky's playing dead man. They came diving, bucketing their Maxims. Whipped and thrown about within his belt, Okie swung his gun back at their darting flashes. Above the engine roar and quick gun rattle he heard the furious thumping of their club. A blade had been split. It would throw itself to pieces in a moment.

Whirling, they threw the lights off. The Fokkers lost them. Still Inky played the dead man. Down through the blackness in

a wild thinking power spin, roaring.

"Cut your switch, guy!" yelled Okie. "We've thrown them off, but we've got to find a landing! Hear that club! She's done for!"

Whirling, whipped about, and that splintered roar still continuing. He seized Inky by the shoulder.

"Spin her to hell!" he yelled. "All right, I'm sticking with you! And let's see, by God, which one of us is the first to cave, if that's the way you feel about it!"

A thousand feet. Eight hundred. Whip, whip! That damned club roar. Still Inky was holding it in the spin. Giving him the works. Still playing dead man. He clutched his gun mount, with jerking head. At five hundred feet he seized Inky's shoulder with a tense grip again.

"All right, you win!" he yelled. "You've got me buffaloes again! But cut your gun and straighten out! Stop playing dead man!"

He shouted. He shook Inky's shoulder. But there was blood upon his hand that came pouring from Inky's neck, and he knew that Inky was not holding out this time to scare him. For Inky *was* a dead man.

BLACKNESS of the ground whirling up toward him. He stood off down rudder in the rear cockpit, against the pressure of Inky's dead foot in front, slamming in his emergency stick with desperation while the night whipped round and that hard ground came leaping. He didn't know how high he was. He could see the altimeter no more. He had cut the throttle, but he couldn't reach the switch. The DH straightened in a blind swift rush.

It was the rip of leaves beneath his wheels that told him he was close to ground. He inched the stick back toward his belt, and waited. The wind went out from beneath his rushing wings. For an immeasurable moment he felt the breathless stall. Hanging in the night on the edge of nothingness, above that unseen ground so hard below. For an immeasurable minute, without breath. Then everything collapsed beneath him, and the ground came crashing at him like a pile-driver hitting a brick wall.

He had snapped his belt in that last split second, landing in a pancake from twenty feet like a piano dropped from a second floor window. Flung out upon the grass as the spruce and linen buckled. He staggered up. His right hand was all numb. The wrist was sprained or broken. He staggered to the ship, grabbing hold of Inky's arm. But the engine had piled up in Inky's lap, and there was no moving him, nor was he caring.

Okie shifted his holster to his left side, reversing his gun in it. Through the darkness he began to stumble and run. The Huns would be hunting for his ship. He might be near enough to the Tornado field for them to have heard the crash. He had landed in some kind of a field covered with plants knee-high. A white wooden cross stared at him as he went slogging through the blackness, and he paused a moment, drew back, staring at it with a dryness in his throat, for it was like a memento of death, of the death that he had asked for. He did not know that it was the cross marking Rene Norck's grave, nor that it was on that great immortal ace's grave itself that his feet had paused. Norck, who had been Jacqueline Tonnerre's husband.

Alone the solitary cross stood, there in the weed path down behind the pig pen.

The solid blackness of a house loomed before him, out of the swimming blackness of the night, in a hundred yards more. Some French farm, and it seemed occupied. They might give him shelter and hiding for tonight, until he could find out what had happened to the French spy, and plan in some way his own escape. They, at least, must be French who lived in here.

He called and whistled softly, but there was no reply. He felt his way along the house wall at the back. There was a cellar door which was open. He crept down earthen steps into it, feeling his way along. He reached for his gun in that moment, and found that he had lost it, carrying it, as he had tried to, reversed in its holster.

He paused, listening. What had made him reach for his gun he didn't know.

He came to a thick iron studded oaken door in a few more cautious steps, and pushed at it, thinking that it might give him some hiding place. He felt a bar

across it, and a lock with a big rusty key. Soundlessly he slipped the bar up. He turned the key. He pushed the door inward with his shoulder and it responded with a great loud scream.

He paused. In that damp earthen darkness which was like the grave there was a step which creaked behind him! As he started to whirl, in a sweat of terror, he felt the swishing of a missile aimed at his head. He tried to duck, but he was not quick enough. It was a billet of cordwood, and it struck him a crashing blow upon the skull. At that instant in front of him, through the door which he had pushed open, he heard a girl's piercing scream. And at the same moment, staggering with bent knees beneath the pain of the blow which had struck him, he felt himself pushed from behind.

He was injected inward, sprawling, with crumpled limbs, striking against someone else in the darkness. His blind hand seized a hand, and in that instant he knew that Jacqueline Tonnerre was not dead, in spite of his betrayal—that he had found her. But neither of them it did any good.

The door had slammed with a swift squeal behind them. The lock clicked, and the iron bar fell in place. They were in the hands of a madman, he and she beneath the earth, and they could starve a long time before anyone would ever find them.

XIII

KUGELMANN walked with lean and thoughtful eyes to where his gray staff car was waiting, with the white-starred blue pennons trailing from its windshield flagstuffs. Fat pear-faced Major-general Adolph Wie and his two aides, his driver and orderly waiting for him.

"Back to the front!" he said. "Chateau-Thierry! I want to see the smokes of Paris before the night."

"The night is still far away, excellency," said Adolph Wie comfortably.

"Who knows?" said Kugelmann.

But why he said that he didn't know. Only that there was a feeling of emptiness and shadows around him, even in the hot burning brightness of the July afternoon. He had lost much in losing Pavian.

A mile or so outside the Tornado gates, on the way back via Fuminix village to the front, at a fork in the road Kugelmann ordered his driver to draw the big gray car to a halt at one side to permit a long string of ambulances to pass. They were bringing back the wounded and the dead from Chateau-Thierry, and were taking this little-used road because the way roads were so crowded. Battered and rusty, mud-splattered, driven by drivers half asleep, they came jerking and jolting along the rutted way. The drivers awoke when they saw the proud aides sitting erectly, the grim withered white-whiskered face beneath the great death's head busby.

"Kugelmann!" the shout passed down the convoy, from one car to the next. *Es geht Kugelmann! Hoch, hoch der alte Tiger! Kugelmann of the Guards!*"

Drivers and more lightly wounded riding in the front seats yelling and cheering. Light sprang into their tired eyes, their lined and haggard faces became joyous with confidence and laughter, as they beheld him sitting there beside the road, his lean gnarled hands resting on the handle of his walking stick, his head nodding a little in approval. Jolt, jolt, jolt, the endless procession came. The cheers, the salutes, the lighted faces. Kugelmann's great Guards. Back from Chateau-Thierry.

"Kugelmann, *hoch! Lebe lang, Kugelmann of the Guards!*"

A dispatch motorcycle came snarling its way against the ambulance stream down the road behind the gray staff car while Kugelmann was halted there. The driver threw himself off saddle. He sprang to the running board.

"Dispatches received at Outres excellency!" he said. "I have had the devil finding you."

Kugelmann took the sheaf of papers, unfolding the first of them:

" 'I am sending you eight more divisions,' " he read, " 'to complete the crash through tomorrow. The iron tide moves on. The strength of our right fist! Our good German sword! For God, for Kaiser, and for Deutschland! Hindenburg!'—Old nail-face," snorted Kugelmann. "He has a vocabulary of more empty blatherskite than a politician. He missed his calling. He

should have been a senator."

He crumpled it, and tossed it away. He broke the seal of the second.

" 'You will halt in the suburbs of Paris tomorrow night,' " he read. " 'By no means proceed farther without waiting for me! I will lead our conquering troops in person! Have ready for me a large white horse. Wilhelm, R. and I!—The bandmaster!' " swore Kugelmann, white with rage. "The damned posturing clown would try to steal the show from me!"

His white tiger whiskers quivered. His eyes were black with rage. He crushed it in his fist and shook it beneath the nose of the dispatch rider.

"Return to Outres!" he said. "I did not receive it! Deliver it to me after the parade!"

A dispatch motorcycle came racing up the road from the front, weaving its way in and out past the ambulances, while Kugelmann was still perusing his other dispatches. A sidecar was attached to it. General Karau-Blintzer, commanding the 5th Weimar Brigade, the famous Old Invincibles, was in the car. The motorcycle drew to a stop with a jolt. Clutching the sides of the car, Karau-Blintzer got heavily out. His bony face was white as paper and the breast of his light trench coat was stained with a great dark smear as if he had fallen in dirty water. He clicked his heels together beside the gray staff car.

"You are all right, excellency?" he gasped.

"Why shouldn't I be?" said Kugelmann. "What's the trouble, Karau-Blintzer?"

"The devildogs are still holding the Marne bridges at Chateau-Thierry, excellency! There is a rumor spreading all through our front ranks like wild-fire that you have been wounded, and on the strength of it the Yankees are starting to counter-attack! My Invincibles have been halted temporarily, and some of the other units have started to retreat! But, thank God, the rumor is false, excellency!"

"Grossly exaggerated," said Kugelmann dryly, with a wave of his hand. "Is that all?"

"All, excellency. Now we will go on, go on—"

Thumb in belt, Karau-Blintzer saluted

again, starting to heel stiffly away.

"Wait!" said Kugelmann. "You have been hurt."

Karau-Blintzer grinned with his bloodless face. He swayed with heels together. The stain on his breast was spreading, dark and wet.

"Not hurt, excellency," he whispered.

"Not hurt, but I'm afraid—"

He lurched, sprawling.

"Stop!" said Kugelmann. "Well, the devil! Pick him up and haul him off the road, Hockelwurst, Gratchen! He will be run over there. And stop that next ambulance coming and see if they have room for him. Tell his driver to return to the front at once and inform his men that everything is fine. There is nothing wrong with me."

THE long train of ambulances was still continuing, far down the rutted road, bumping and jolting on, carrying Kugelmann's great invincible Guards by the squads an dozens back from Chateau-Thierry. And they would continue long.

"We cannot wait," said Kugelmann. "They shouldn't have blocked the road from us. Where does this left fork lead? A short cut from the village, eh? By all means take it."

They went grinding in second gear up the narrow rutted road to the left from the fork, still miry from the rain five days ago. Tires spun, stones were flicked away. The road was steep. The engine boiled.

"Perhaps," said Adolph Wie nervously, "perhaps we should not go any farther, excellency. If we could find a place to turn around we could go back to Outres, where we have our supper that will be ready for us, and our comfortable beds. We'll be in reach of their hell-smashing long-range naval guns in ten miles more. They've got them mounted on railroad cars up and down the line, and you don't know where they'll open up next and begin to hit. Much as I snort and yearn like an old war-horse for the heat of battle and the sound of crashing steel, still it seems my higher duty to see that your excellency does not endanger your own priceless life."

"The steel has not been mined that will ever get me, Adolph," said Kugelmann.

"Haven't I told you that before?"

"Yes, but excellency—"

"Bah!" said Kugelmann. "You are a man of earth, a pot-bellied man, living in the terror of death. What do you know of immortal destiny, as I do, and of God? I tell you that the gypsy prophesied at my birth and that for nearly seventy years I have seen the working of the divine will. I shall never die."

The big spinning steaming gray Mercedes had come clawing over the crest of the hilly road. Beyond the top of the ridge, at the left side of the road, there was an old stone farmhouse. Woodsheds and barns and pig-pens lay out behind, and weed patches and orchards and fields of cut hay. There were maples on the lawns whose shade was pleasant, and an old well with a long well-sweep whose handle was polished smooth by the use of many generations. Kugelmann's eye lit on the well.

"Let's stop here," he said. "You can get water for your radiator, and I would like to have a drink myself. My throat's dry and burning."

He got out, stretching his legs. Followed by Adolph and his two aides he advanced to the farmhouse door. Far off from the west there was the vibration of heavy guns. In the hot summer sky a half mile above him a patrol of the Tornado went singing over, from their field not far away, headed out to battle on furious hornet wings. But here beneath the shade of the maples on the quiet road everything was peaceful.

They stood before the farmhouse door, and Hockelwurst knocked with a firm fist. The door opened. An old, old peasant in a dirty blue smock and sabots stood peering out. He bowed almost double at sight of the medals, the shining boots.

"Zu Befehl, Herren!" he said in German. "At your command, lords!"

"Well, on my life and soul, a good German!" said Kugelmann easily. "Hello, Landsman. It's good not to have another one of these damned greasy sullen Frogs, talking wop-wop-wop. What the devil are you doing here, old man?"

"Waiting for you," said the old man.

"Waiting for me!" laughed Kugelmann. "Now isn't that a joke! How long have

you been waiting? Why you might have waited your life away, old man. It was only by chance that I happened to come this way at all."

"But I had a dream that the great General Kugelmann would come by. A voice of fate told me, lord. And see, I was not mistaken."

Kugelmann laughed again.

"You believe in dreams, too, and in the whisperings of fate, old man?" he said. "Yes, it is true: there is no such thing as chance, as you were right. There is something in your face which is slightly familiar. Have I ever met you before?"

"No, lord, I'm sure of it. But I had a son in the service once, Corporal Albert Wolff of the 5th East Prussian Corps. He lies buried in the field behind."

"This place is somehow reminiscent," said Kugelmann with a slight frown. "Perhaps I passed a night here in my youth, or in a dream. What I have stopped for now is a deep refreshing drink of cold water to refresh my thirst. My throat is burning dry, and there is something which is strangling me."

"Gladly. If your lordships will kindly wait, I'll quench your thirst with pleasure."

The old peasant disappeared in the interior darkness of the house, and came back in half a trice. He had perhaps done no more than spin on his heel, but he had a big black Webley .455 in his hand now which he had pulled from underneath his smock with its hammer cocked.

There was nothing that the four astounded Germans could have done, even if he hadn't pulled it out so quickly and without warning, for they were all of them unarmed, having taken off their belts in the car to ease their hips, and having left them when they emerged. And armed or not, it was too quick. Before any of them had seen clear the nature of the object which he had so suddenly pulled forth, that damned old man had pushed the muzzle of the gun against the breast of Over-lieutenant Paulus Hockelwurst, and it roared with a great sound. He pushed it against the breast of Under-lieutenant Otto Gratchen, and it roared with a great sound. He pushed it against the breast of Major-general Adolph Wie before the echoes of

those two sudden hideous banks had died away or Hockelwurst and Gratchen had fallen with their hearts half blown away. And by this time, in the second's flash poor Adolph had half realized what was coming, and he started to shriek—but the big gun roared a third time, loud and quick, and the shriek was never uttered.

The man in the blue smock pressed the gun then into the face of his excellency Lieutenant-general Maximilian Eitelhorn von Kugelmann, Order of the Star of Prussia, Knight Commander of the Red Eagle, Most Exalted of the Double Cordon. He pushed the gun into the face of Kugelmann, not against Kugelmann's breast as with the others, but into Kugelmann's teeth where it would blow his head away.

KUGELMANN," he said, "I'm glad to meet you. I had a dream that you would come this way, and I've waited forty-seven long and patient years. I am the father of Albert Wolff, lance corporal, whom you had hanged upon this field in '71 while you sat swilling wine and laughing with your whores on your knee. And I am the father of Margherita Wolff, who was Albert's sister and for whose sake he struck you, if that means anything to you. I had a dream that you would stop here to quench your thirst. And here you are, and your thirst shall now be quenched. And God is just and hell is hot and fire is long. Nor shall I give you a chance to fall on your knees now and pray, Kugelmann."

Then with the big smoking Webley jammed against Kugelmann's bleeding lips and aching teeth he pulled the trigger a fourth time, deliberately. But this time the Webley did not roar again because a cartridge was defective or the hammer hadn't been drawn back or because the hour of Kugelmann's fate hadn't come upon him.

"Avenging God!" the old man screamed, and stood there with his ghastly face, while the gun wobbled in his hand in his terror.

"I don't remember you or your son Albert, old man," said Kugelmann with a terrible grin. "And I have only a vague recollection of your daughter Margherita, who had, if I'm not mistaken, a nice slim

figure, but developed quickly a weakness for strong liquor. Or perhaps I am thinking of another Margherita, for in my life there have been a hundred. However, I am interested in your account of your prophetic dream, for I too believe in dreams and visions and the whisperings of fate. Only it is too bad for you that you woke up before your dream was finished, old man. For this is the finish of it."

And he kicked away the groaning quivering body of Adolph Wie which had fallen at his feet. He leaped, and he wrestled for the gun with that screaming crazed old peasant. And old Wolff was strong with the strength of the earth, with the endless labor of heaving hay and loading rocks, but he was older by ten years than Kugelmann, and Kugelmann was better fed and better kept, with a sinewy gymnast's muscles. Stronger than many young men are, as terrible as a tough old tiger. He wrenched the gun away from the paralyzed old viper, and he slammed him on the head with it, and kicked and slammed him to the floor as he surged in, and kicked again, while the man on the floor with a bloody face and wild blank eyes looked up at him, conscious still for a long time.

With shouts and yells of terror his chauffeur and orderly came running from the big-gray car out on the road, spilling their water-bucket at the well, bringing a Madsen sub-machine gun. They had heard those shots banging, one, two, three, so murderous, so quick, and they thought it was Kugelmann who had been killed—Kugelmann, the fierce invincible Kugelmann, their great Caesar of the Guards. They were terrified out of their boots, for if Kugelmann fell his million Guards fell with him.

"God in heaven! What is loose yet, excellency! Mass murder!"

His excellency wiped his lip and brushed out his mutilated mustaches as they leaped the bodies on the threshold and came surging in with ready guns.

"A man," he said. "A madman. Quite idiotic. He has an old woman somewhere. I saw her darting down the cellar stairs. There may be more of the rats. We will search the house. Bring rope from the

car, all you have. Give me the gun. I'll blast them out. We will hang them all, and their swine and their cattle."

"Ach, excellency, your lip is bleeding. Allow me to mop it off for you. You have been hit?"

"The metal hasn't been mined that will ever get me, Carl," said Kugelmann with his frosty smile, with terrible eyes, "Get the rope. Come on!"

As his orderly ran back for the big gray car in the road Kugelmann paused with his sergeant-driver, looking back at the body of his own friend Major-general Adolph Wie, lying with a hole as big as a man's fist in the back of his tunic across the two aides on the door-stone.

"Upon my soul," he muttered, "I think poor Adolph didn't half believe me. Well, the laugh is on him, all right. Too bad he doesn't know it."

With guns they went through that silent place and down the cellar stairs.

XIV

WELL, there they were, down there in the blackness, the blonde young French dancer, the treacherous and lovely French spy whom Kugelmann had long desired and hated with all his soul and life, and the blond Yankee gunner of the Seahorses, a person of far less importance in the great scheme of war, but who likewise had earned on many scores the hatred of Kugelmann and of Kugelmann's great flying thunderbolt, Max Pavian of the Tornado.

They had been three days down in that damp black lightless cellar, foodless, waterless except for what moisture they could get from the seepage of the damp stone walls, lightless while stars rose and suns set, in the power of a grave-doomed old lunatic who came at times outside their prison door, and cackled and laughed at them, and spoke to them in weeping endearing words, and shrieked with laughter again when the girl tried to reason with him, or when Okie shouted and raved and lunged against the door.

But after a day without food, without light, shaken by chill, Okie had not done so much of that. And after two days he

had done none at all. Now, when more than sixty hours had rolled around, more than half of the third day of their imprisonment in that damp tomb, he had, perhaps, for a little while gone as crazy as the ancient farmer. The blow on the head which the old lunatic had given him still ached steadily, and there was fever and poison in him, and a lightness in his bones.

Three days without food, there in the eternal blackness, with only the girl's hand blindly to touch with her the only reality and link with the world of living men from which they were buried and the blackness had become peopled for him with strange visions. Queer floating nightmares. Voices and ghostly shapes and silences.

BANG, bang, bang of shots! Muffled dim. Somewhere overhead. Dreams flashed before Okie's eyes. He was galloping fast across sage brush country, uncoiling the rope from his saddle horn on the trail of a bawling maverick. He was flying with Whistleberry Bean, and the Whistleberry yelled, "That's Pavian!" keeling over, turning tail and running. But the dreams got all mixed up, and the bawling maverick had the face of Whistleberry Bean, and he was galloping across the sky on a Spanish saddle, coiling his rope at clouds, and a rattlesnake went streaking by him and he banged away with his Colt at it.

"Stop playing dead man, Ink!" he muttered. "We're riding herd on these orange cows."

Someone came breathing and whispering on rustling feet down the cellar stairs outside the thick barred door. Silence, then the thunder of quick booted feet following down! A loud triumphant yell.

"*Da sie ist!*"

"There she is," muttered Okie. "Now who the hell is talking German? That must be old Dutch George from the Lazy 49, come over to steal a drink."

"*Da sie ist!*"

The thundering feet. A shrill old woman's scream outside the door.

"There she is! Take her, take her! We'll give her the rope! Watch out! She has a knife!"

"*Ach—!*"

A grunt. The shrill wild scream again.

The rushing feet. Shots roared and reverberated. Okie sat on the earth floor with his back against the damp stones, holding his swollen wrist on his lap and rubbing his head with his left hand. He couldn't piece this dream together.

Bang! bang! bang! quick-firing. Echoes crashing, dying. The sound of hoarse oaths, a hoarse gurgling and gasping. No more screaming.

"Where did she knife you, Carl? Answer me!"

"Look at his throat, *um Gottes Willen*, excellency! Carl! Carl! I'll tear her living eyes out!" Thud, thud! "Wake up, get up, you murdering old witch!"

"She's dead," said the dry voice. "You gave her too many, Axson. Hold that gun. Don't be too quick to shoot again. There must be more of them in this rat and viper's nest. Did I see a door?"

Still that terrible throaty gurgle.

"Don't mind him, Axson. There's nothing to be done. He'll cough his last soon. It is a door! There're more of them. Open, open!"

Okie got slowly to his feet. Hallucinations. His knees were water under him. His head was a bubble. He leaned against the damp stone wall. He felt the girl in the darkness pressed against him, clinging to him with the terror of the dark and unmitigable despair.

"Kill me!" she was gasping. "Can't I die? Kill me! Is there a stone? Don't let him get his hands on me!"

There was a thudding against the door. Then the great iron bar outside lifted. The rusty lock clicked. The rusty hinges squeaked with a long-drawn scream. A light flashed. The pale torch beam blinded Okie's eyes, inured to darkness. He saw the pallid face, the wild dark eyes of the girl beside him, frozen with a dreadful terror that he could neither understand nor share in, since it was all a dream to him.

"Don't move!" the harsh voice said. "Here are two of them, general! A devil-dog, he looks like, and a female bundle of joy, a pretty one. Don't move! There's a Madsen on you!"

"Ah!" said the dry voice. "The clever *Fraulein* Tonnerre, and the missing Yankee gunner! Keep nicely on ice for us by

our friend the lunatic. I should have been more patient with him. *Fraulein* Tonnerre! Devildog! The thing will go on as appointed. You have the rope, Axson? Proceed! The lady first."

IT was all a very wild strange dream to Okie. The strangest and least real of all that he had had for sixty hours. He dreamed that that voice which buzzed so dryly in his ears was the voice of Kugelmann. He dreamed that he was walking out through the cellar door, following Jacqueline Tonnerre's figure in the light of the moving torch, stumbling out past the shot-riddled body of an old woman lying on the floor of the outer cellar, and past a German soldier slumped in the corner with head twisted queerly on a dripping crimson collar. He dreamed that they were walking with slow creeping feet up the stairs, and into the shadows of a room above, where even with closed shutters the light was almost too bright and blinding to be borne, after those long days in the impenetrable blackness underground. He dreamed all this, though he did not feel his feet moving. It was the wildest dream of all, and went to show how far hunger and fever pain had gone in the unhinging of his mind.

Yes, a hallucination that there was the terrible old man in the Death's Head busby, with the long white mustaches and the glittering black eyes. That there was the thick-necked bald German soldier with the pimples on his face, holding the sub-machine gun. A dream of Jacqueline Tonnerre with her sleek gilt hair, her great terrified black eyes.

"Where are you, Jacqueline?" he said, spacing his words carefully. "You know, I heard you talking to me a while ago. But I'm off in a queer dream. It seems to me that we are out of the cellar, and that you are standing over there. And that someone has stuffed a handkerchief into your mouth, and your hands tied behind you. Oh, it's the damndest thing. I seem to see that old lunatic farmer, and he's wearing a Death's Head busby, and he looks like Kugelmann."

"*Achtung!*" said that phantom figure which looked like Kugelmann. "Can you

tie a slip-noose, devildog?"

"And it asks me if I can tie a slip-noose," said Okie. "And it asks me if I can tie a slip-noose," he said. "It's a very strange dream, Jacqueline."

He dreamed that the gagged and bound girl was struggling desperately in the arms of that spider-tiger, of that lean evil black dyed white-whiskered Caesar of the Guards. He had a hallucination that the thick-necked German soldier with the sub-machine gun was advancing on him threateningly, tendering him a rope and gesticulating. There was a great beam across the vaulted ceiling overhead, and toward that the man with the machine-gun was gesticulating, and to a chair.

His knees were water, and his head was a bubble. He got up on the chair, he didn't know just how. Perhaps he floated. And he had his left hand and the elbow of his right. Holding the rope pressed to his side, he tied the slip-noose very carefully, and rove the rope through, while that damned ghost of a Death-headed Hun held that lovely ghost of a girl, and the man with the ghostly gun prodded him.

He stood there on the chair, and he had fashioned it.

"*Schnell jetzt!*" croaked the man with the machine-gun. "Blob-wots! Blob-wots!" Or words like that, meaning nothing. Sticking that damned gun in his belly.

"Over the beam, devildog, and make it tight!" snarled Kugelmann. "You had better make it tight and strong, for it will bear you next! Fling it up over the beam, devildog! Can you fling it?"

"And it asks me whether I can fling it," said Okie.

The struggling girl in the fierce arms of old Kugelmann tore the gag loose against his shoulder as he forced her toward the center of the room, toward the chair where Okie stood swaying, laughing. Laughing lightheadedly that he should be so insane as to have such an insane dream.

"Okie!" she screamed. "Okie, don't do it!"

Okie stood dazed.

"Why, for Christmas sake!" he said in a voice that was eerie but clear. "Why, it's not a dream! Why, you pair of murdering Kraut lice!"

HE whirled and kicked. He kicked the thick-necked man with the machine-gun beneath the chin with the weight of one hundred and eighty pounds. And if he hadn't been so feeble with lack of nourishment and wounds, he would have kicked the Madsen man's head clear off. But as it was he just kicked him back five feet against the wall, and kicked his eyes out pop-eyed. The Madsen man lay sprawled back there on the floor, and there was crimson seeping down his lips.

With a screech Kugelman had hurled the girl away from him. With a tiger leap he dived for the gun which the faithful Axson had let fall.

"Stop right there!" said Okie.

The coiled noose went streaking from his left hand as Kugelmann reached the gun. He hauled it tight as Kugelmann jerked forward. And then his knees collapsed beneath him, and he fell backward off the chair.

He lay there, and then he got up. He had almost jerked his left arm from its socket, with the pull of the rope which he had wound around his left wrist, with the force of his fall. He got up, leaping toward Kugelmann, upon the floor beside the Madsen gun. Something told him he must reach the gun.

He had got it. He wrenched it away from Kugelmann's stiff fingers on the floor. With a staggering leap he sprawled backward across the floor to Jacqueline.

"Knife in my hip pocket!" he said. "Back up to me, and you can pull it out. Spring clasp opens it! Cut your hands free, run! Run! Run while I cover him. See how the devil's looking at you! I've got him covered now, but I don't know what deviltry he's planning!"

Kugelmann lay face down on the floor, glaring around at Okie over his shoulder. His fierce tiger mustaches were pointed one up, one down. The cords stood out on his forehead. Savagely he lay there on the floor with his twisted neck staring around at Okie, and the rope which Okie had hurled was still about his throat. And Okie stared at that dreadful look. After a long, long while he saw that Kugelmann was not moving, was not breathing. That Kugelmann was dead.

Well, the snap of a rope about the neck of a lunging man, with the weight of one hundred and eighty pounds jerking at it from the other end, would break a far less brittle, a far fatter neck than Kugelmann's.

Okie stared, backing toward the door. And the girl had got her hands free now. He felt the clutch of her fingers in his arm as she backed with him. That terrible twisted face upon the floor. Kugelmann!

Hanged, dead, neck down, anyway. And with him there were hanged a million men. There lay, stretched by the neck, the hope of Germany. . . .

They backed toward the door, step by step. And then they felt the threshold beneath their feet. They turned. They went stumbling out. There were other dead men lying on the ground not far away from the door, where Kugelmann's orderly and Kugelmann's sergeant-driver had dragged them. They were out beneath open daylight, and the road in front of them, was deserted except for Kugelmann's empty car. There was no one to see them on the road, but there was a plane droning on over in the sky. Eyes that would see them in a moment. But they had no strength to return for hiding inside that house of death.

Okie bent beside one of the dead men. Snatched up the gray cape which the young German aide had been carrying draped over his arm. Threw it around the girl's shoulders. Unbuttoned and took off the gold-corded tunic, with the epaulets and all the bloodied ribbons, from that torn breast. Swiftly he shed his own coat and donned the German, in the shadow of the house wall.

That plane came droning over in sight above the trees, from the direction of the Tornado field, as he thrust one of the dead German's caps, a size too small, upon his head. That ship was not above a thousand feet high. It was coming over the farmhouse in a wide lazy circle. From the air a figure in a cape, a figure in German blouse and cap, would look like two fully clad German soldiers, he could hope. Three dead men like three men who in idleness had flung themselves down on the lush summer grass for a siesta.

SLOWLY and nonchalantly he ventured to look up. The great black V of Pavian! The Fokker's motor was cut off. Circling!

It was coming down in spirals to a landing in the hayfield back of the house.

"He's seen us!" the girl gasped.

He shook his head.

"Seen us, yes. But he doesn't guess." he said. "Come on!"

He turned. He darted back inside that house of death. He turned his face away from the horrid face of that hanged man on the floor. He reached for the gun which he had dropped, the very wicked Madsen. Holding it at his side he sprang out.

"Come!" he said.

The fire-bright Fokker of the great Tornado king had landed. As they went that way, keeping in the shadow of outbuildings, they saw Pavian spring out. He came swaggering toward them, drawing off his gauntlets. He had caught sight of them drifting along the shadow of the woodshed.

"Hockelwurst?" he shouted from fifty feet away. "Saw his excellency's car parked empty by the road side for thirty minutes, and I won—"

They moved toward him, with the gun pointed, Okie with blazing eyes.

"Wonder all you want!" he said. "You may be a wonder in the skies, but it won't do you any good against this beauty. Don't reach for that Luger! Claw air!"

He backed in front of them toward his humming ship, idling there on the cut field. He backed, with his eyes staring at the girl.

"Well?" said Okie. "Out of the way! Lie flat on the ground and keep your arms spread till you hear me zoom away, or you'll eat German lead, Pavian! She's flying on the wing with me. She's going home—home, damn you! If you make a move—"

He felt the touch of Jacqueline Tonnerre's hand on his arm. Pavian was not looking at him. He was looking at the girl. And Okie had the somewhat chagrined feeling that Pavian had not heard him and was not aware of him at all.

"Well, Pavian?" she said with trembling lips. "Is there more to say? Was that not said three nights ago when you had me where you thought that I would die."

"I forgot," he said. "I forgot to ask you, mademoiselle. What it meant."

"What what meant, Pavian?"

They had reached the humming Fokker now, and Pavian stood away. Okie still kept his gun leveled as he climbed in, but still he had the feeling that Pavian was not aware of him.

"The words you used to say, mademoiselle '*Amant ami, je t'adore*' The way in which you once said them to me, mademoiselle. What did they mean?"

"If I knew what they meant, Pavian," she said, "I might not even now, not even in the fear of death, nor for all France's sake, be willing to go! No!" she said. "No, I don't mean that. What do I mean?" she said, with a half gasp, half sob to Okie Crow.

"On the wing, sister!" Okie said. "And here's a belt to buckle about yourself. If a woman had a mind of her own she'd be a man. And what fun would there be in life then? Pavian, I'll check this ship at the field of the 10th Marines, Lourtou-val, and you can have it by coming and getting it any time you say."

He opened up the throttle with a slow increasing song. Pavian was still standing, as if in a dream. Suddenly he rushed forward. He had pulled his Luger out.

"Kill me!" he roared. "But you'll not take my ship!"

But he said that to the empty wind that streaked behind them, for Okie had opened her up with a roar, and they were streaking across the field and into the air with a leap, in the ship of the king of the Hun Tornado. Behind them on the field, Pavian stood with pistol smoking. But his marksmanship, strangely, wasn't very good.

He had turned. He was walking to the farmhouse, as Okie banked a thousand feet high and climbed for the west on soaring wings. He paused at the door, he entered in. And what he would find there would break the hearts of a million of the great German Guards. But of the million none less than Pavian's.

Five Angels Make An Ace

by JOHANAS
L. BOUMA



An "angel" is a thousand feet of altitude and, without his angels, this Zero-killer from the Pacific was just a shaky, white-faced kid!

THEY ROARED DOWN OUT OF their bleak world. Their props slashed the driving rain and the spray formed grotesque patterns on their plexi-glas housings. There was the growl of engines and the hiss of tires against steel matting. And then the Thunderbolts

coughed and stuttered to silence.

Kettner palmed back the hatch and dropped to the hardstand. On his features, gaunt and hollowed by shadows, lay the memory of this past action. He unsnapped the harness from around his legs and slipped out of the awkward seat pack.

Lifting his face, he felt the rain slacken, and he saw a break in the dirty sky. He remembered suddenly that it was not yet noon, that they would go over at least once more before dark.

He turned and watched the jeep throw a brown sheet of mud and water along the taxi strip. It skidded to a stop on the hardstand. The Colonel was a stocky man with a lined face. He was hunched behind the wheel, a sodden baseball cap pulled low over his eyes. The rain had stained his leather jacket a dull black.

"Who got it?" he asked quietly.

"Parker," said Kettner. "We went after a column of trucks. He caught some small stuff in his wing tank. Crashed and burned."

He dropped his chute on the back seat and climbed in beside the Colonel. "Anything new?"

"Troop movement reported above San Marina." The Colonel clashed the gears and they slid onto the taxi strip. He raised his voice. "Got a replacement. Came in while you were gone."

"We can use him," Kettner said.

"He tried to tell me he was transferred to the wrong outfit," the Colonel said. "He doesn't like it."

They slid to a stop as a figure stepped clear of the next Thunderbolt. This was Max. He was red headed, tough and wiry. He grinned and tossed his gear in the jeep, saying, "That Gothic Line. You see 'em down there, Mike? They've got the villages leveled and they're dug inside. And that Foglia River is nothing but fortification." He looked toward the east where, if you listened closely, you could hear the rumble of the big guns. "Cripes! I'd hate to be going in there on foot to dig 'em out."

Kettner chuckled. Max was his deputy lead. They had been flying the P-47s for a long time. "I wouldn't like it," he said. "I'll stick to the air."

INTERROGATION was over. The pilots finished their coffee and dispersed to the area for a short break. Kettner and Max went with the Colonel to look at the new pilot. He was studying silhouettes of German aircraft when they

entered Ops, a Lieutenant, slim and elegant in his tailored uniform. Cellophane covered ribbons gleamed beneath the wings above the left breast pocket of his blouse.

"Spangler," the Colonel said. "Meet Captain Kettner, your Squadron Leader. Max here is deputy."

They shook hands. Spangler was young, blond and handsome. He grinned with cocky assurance. Max looked at the ribbons and widened his eyes. "Pacific Theatre, eh? Man, you must've been there and stayed overnight."

"Four Japs to my credit," the new pilot said. He shrugged casually. "Thought I'd get my Ace rating by knocking off a Nazi. Find out if they're really as tough as they say."

"You won't have much chance of finding that out in this outfit," Kettner said. "It's not often we spot enemy fighters. They use 'em against the Bombers. This is the thankless end of flying. You'll be down on the deck most of the time, strafing, throwing rockets. We're right back of the lines here. You'll go out twice, sometimes three times a day. Troops, supply dumps, ammunition dumps, sometimes tanks, anything that looks like good hunting. You'll have time for coffee and a smoke while your ground crew load you up again. Then it's the same thing all over."

The new man nodded. "So the Colonel told me. But I'm sure there's been a mistake in my orders. I asked to get into a fighter outfit." He smiled. "Not discrediting you fellows, of course."

"Thanks," Max murmured. "Nice of you to say so."

"That's quite all right," the new man said. "I realize that your job is essential. But as a matter of fact I don't care for your type of flying. I like plenty of maneuvering space when I do my fighting."

Max stared at him with open mouth. He looked quickly at Kettner. A wicked gleam gathered in his eyes. "You must be one of the men of courage they write about in the papers back home," he said. "A hero. You got any press clippings, Spangler?"

"As a matter of fact—" Spangler's

hand reached back for his pocket. Then it stopped as he looked closely at Max. A quick flush broke across his cheeks. "Are you trying to rib me, Lieutenant?"

"Me?" Max grinned. "Why, Lieutenant—"

"Listen," Kettner said, "you'll get a belly full of fighting in this outfit. And you'll get it starting this afternoon."

Spangler stopped glaring at Max. "I'm still putting in for that transfer," he said. "I said I asked for a fighter outfit, not a bunch of strafing hedge hoppers."

The Colonel came around his desk. "That's enough. Cut out this malarkey and grab some chow. You'll be going out in an hour."

"All right," the new man said stiffly. He jerked his head toward Max. "I can take it if he can."

"Just don't try to be a hero," Max snapped. "It might prove fatal."

THE rain had stopped. The overcast broke and scattered to low, cumulous clouds. Ground crews hurried about their tasks, loading rockets, filling ammunition belts, topping fuel tanks. Pilots checked their ships and waited for the green flare.

Kettner leaned against the tail of his Thunderbolt, mentally reviewing the orders. The specific target was troop movement, sighted earlier that morning by reconnaissance. After that anything on wheels or foot would be in order.

Kettner climbed to the office. He settled his lanky frame until he felt comfortable, then adjusted his helmet and his headset. He tuned his receiver to the tower and turned over the Pratt and Whitney. The two thousand horses thundered across the field. The rest of the fighters joined in to form a chorus of sound that ripped the former silence of this field. At the green flare Kettner waved his crew chief to pull the chocks. He released the brakes and trundled toward the head of the strip. One by one the Thunderbolts lifted clear.

Kettner kept the formation at six thousand feet altitude. The river was ahead of them now. Off his left wing, Kettner could see the broken spans of the bridge they had bombed a week before. Beyond it was another, a torn mass of concrete and

steel. Every bridge in this sector had been bombed, leaving two German Divisions trapped on this near side.

Fire leaped from the river banks, leaped from concealed 20mm. guns, from concealed machine gun nests. From a cluster of torn buildings came the startling yellow flashes of rocket fire. They tore flaming holes in the sky, directly toward the formation. Kettner jerked his stick against his belly, watched the rockets flash past his wings. He heard the explosion back there; he twisted his head and saw Number Six Thunderbolt droop its wings around its flaming body. It swung lazily, turned over completely and disintegrated.

For one tense moment Kettner's mind was a blank. Then his brain functioned and told him the name of the pilot. It seemed ridiculous to think that they had left the field only a few minutes before. The comparative safety of the field, and now this.

Kettner looked ahead and saw the roofs of San Marina off at two o'clock. A double railroad track led to the dead marshalling yards, visited by medium bombers months before. Crushed and torn locomotives lay half buried in shell craters. The repair shops were burned out shells, gaunt and stark against the brown earth. It would be a long time before trains left on schedule from this place.

Kettner took the formation down to three hundred feet and swung past the town. Now he could see the highway on which troop movement had been reported. He dropped his nose and followed the highway, because this was the way to do it. At low altitude, a formation of fighters could not hope for a surprise attack.

AT first glance the highway appeared empty of movement. Then a single dot materialized in the distance. Kettner wagged his wings and the formation spread out, some to flank the sides of the highway. In the next moment he saw that the dot was a motorcycle.

The highway curved. Suddenly Kettner saw the tanks, their guns like long feelers ahead of them. Behind the tanks there were trucks, loaded with infantry. There was sudden confusion down there as the

Thunderbolts roared in for the attack. Figures scrambled from the trucks and dove headlong toward the edge of the highway. The tanks lumbered to sullen halts and their turrets and big guns lifted in tremble to point at the formation.

Kettner spoke quickly into his throat mike. "Max, you and your flight concentrate on the infantry. I'll take the tanks, Spangler, you stick with me."

He lined up the lead tank and released a rocket. The Thunderbolt jerked as the flaming missile left its tube. It was as if a tub of molten steel had been flung across the tank.

Kettner flew the length of the tank column and back. A dozen of the steel monsters were flaming wrecks now. Max and his flight were concentrating on both sides of the highway, strafing the confused infantry, the trucks. Now they were getting answering fire from the remaining tanks. The big 88s belched flame. The machine gun turrets swung relentlessly, tracking the fighters. A Thunderbolt crashed and became an orange ball of fire. Kettner lined up another tank and watched it die. A few of them had rolled from the highway and were scattering across the field. Kettner followed and used up the last of his rockets. Then he joined in on the strafing runs.

Dead infantry lay sprawled on both sides of the highway. They lay in torn clusters on the bloody earth. The living ran about like terror-stricken cattle, trying in vain to escape this death from the sky. Some knelt in the mud, firing their rifles at the rushing aircraft. Another Thunderbolt smashed flaming to the ground, and another. Kettner suddenly remembered the new pilot. He hauled back on the stick and looked around. A Thunderbolt was flying aimlessly overhead. It was Spangler's ship. Kettner gave him a call.

"What's the trouble up there? Are you all right?"

The answer came, dry and tight. "I'm okay. I—" The voice stopped, as if unable to continue. Kettner had heard that choking off before. The killing was getting this kid. He had been used to impersonal combat that involved one plane against another.

§—Wings—Spring

The type of combat on which you did not become entangled with the thought of killing another human. It was machine against machine. It was impersonal. Now the kid was finding it out the hard way, by strafing infantry.

Kettner called the formation and led them back to the field. He parked his Thunderbolt on its hardstand and walked through the mud to Spangler's plane. The kid was still in the cockpit, the hatch pulled back. He looked around as Kettner approached. His face was white and twisted, his eyes enormous.

"What was the trouble?" Kettner asked.

Spangler didn't answer. Looking beneath the wings, Kettner saw that only half of the rockets had been fired. He frowned and said sharply, "You weren't loaded with rockets with the idea of bringing them back."

The kid shook his head, his eyes tight-shut. He climbed slowly from the cockpit and stood looking at the ground. "I told you I wasn't any good down low," he said in a shaky voice.

"Look at the hero," somebody said. It was Max. He had his chute over one shoulder, his helmet cocked on the back of his head. "What's the matter, hero? Too bloody for you?"

The kid straightened with a jerk and took a step. "I'll tell you after I let a little blood out of you."

KETTNER held him back. "You can stop that right now. You too, Max." He kept a tight hold on the kid's arm. "Now suppose you explain yourself. How long had you been up there?"

"I made one run. Then—" He jerked his arm away. "I told you I wasn't any good at low level flying."

"You said that before," Kettner said dryly. "Just why aren't you any good at it?"

"Yeah," Max said, "don't you like strafing infantry?"

"The hell with you," Spangler said shortly. He looked at Kettner. "It's not that. It's—it's something else."

Looking at him, Kettner saw fear in the kid. "What?" he asked. "Get it off your chest. You'll find it helps."

"I lost a buddy once, in training. We were practicing strafing runs. He—he was dead ahead of me and too low." The kid made a gesture. "He creamed all over the field. Ever since then—"

"All right," Kettner said wearily. "Maybe we can get you that transfer."

The kid didn't answer. Kettner turned back to his ship to gather his gear. Max walked along with him. "Imagine," Max said, "letting a little thing like that get him down. And he wants to be an Ace."

"Lay off him," Kettner said.

"I got no use for heroes. Especially when they carry press clippings around with them. Incidentally, Mike, you remember where we bombed that bridge last week?"

"A nice job," Kettner said. "What about it?"

"When we crossed there coming back, I thought I noticed something in the river about three hundred yards below the bridge. You know how they stretch a wooden bridge under water so it can't be spotted? Well, that's what I thought it was."

"You sure?"

Max shook his head. "It might have been reflection from the water."

"Better get it over to interrogation," Kettner said. "If there is a bridge there it means those two German divisions aren't cut off."

"Let's go," Max said.

The interrogation officer listened to Max's story. When it was finished he snapped "One minute," and strode out of the tent. He returned with the Colonel, talking excitedly.

"All right," the Colonel said. "Here it is, men. You know the British Eighth is holding most of that section. This morning they reported that the Germans on this side had been reenforced. Light tanks, trucks and a lot of infantry. Now there's no doubt but what they've built themselves an underwater bridge, moving their stuff across at night. Recon hasn't spotted it, and if there's anything in what Max saw, this is it. You think you can remember the spot, Max?"

"Shouldn't be too tough. If I could throttle my ship back—"

"That's it." The Colonel looked hard at Max. "You like to take a chance?"

"Anytime," Max said.

"All right. There's an L-5 down the line that the infantry has been using to spot artillery fire. You take that over the river, find your bridge and radio the boys in."

"I said a chance," Max grunted. "I don't want to be a bloody pigeon." He grinned. "Okay. When do we do it?"

The Colonel looked out the tent flap, at the sun lowering away. "We'll run it off in the morning, early. Let's hope it's clear."

"Let's hope the Krauts along there haven't got the bullet with my name on it," Max said dryly. He turned and went outside.

"Good boy," the Colonel said. He looked closely at Kettner. "I understand you had some trouble with Spangler. The boys were grumbling."

"I think you'd better give him that transfer," Kettner said slowly.

"I don't like the idea. What with our losses the past few days, we need every man we can get. I'll have a talk with him."

THERE were sudden shouts outside. Kettner ducked past the tent flap and saw men gathered together in a tight circle. He shouldered through them, knowing that this was a fight. Spangler was on his knees, his head limp. Blood ran from his cut mouth. Max stood over him, rubbing his fist.

"Okay, hero," he was saying, "you asked for it. You wanted in a fighter outfit, but you didn't bring any fight with you."

Kettner turned him with a sweep of his hand. "No more of that, Max." He turned to Spangler. "On your feet, kid."

The kid came slowly upright. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and looked at the blood. He spoke softly at Max. "Next time you call me a hero, we'll do this all over again. And we'll keep doing it until—"

"No you won't," Kettner said. "You're getting that transfer. Until then you'll be grounded."

"I've changed my mind about that transfer," the kid said, still looking at Max.

"And you won't ground me."

"All right," Kettner said. There was anger in the kid, but Kettner had the feeling that much of it was directed inward. For a long time he had had his fear of low flying, and he had covered it with a thin layer of cocky assurance. Now Max had ripped him wide open, bringing it home to the kid. Kettner hoped it would work out. At times anger took a man over the hump. "All right," he said again. "If you're sure you've made up your mind."

"I've made it up."

He turned sharply and bucked his way through the crowd.

THE next morning was gray and somber. A yellow wash in the east marked the hidden sun. Along the line, the Thunderbolts waited with their bomb loads, 500-pounders slung beneath each wing. Kettner turned his gaze to the head of the runway where Max was warming the L-5 in preparation to take off. The high-winged observation plane looked flimsy and light in comparison to the 47s. Max hadn't been far wrong. With its slow speed the plane would be a sitting duck for enemy fire.

The tiny plane lifted clear and hummed toward the lines. Kettner waited the interval; he crawled in the cockpit and started his engine. Once upstairs, he thumbed his mike switch and made his call.

"Green Ribbon Leader calling L-5. Come in, Max."

"Don't be in a hurry," Max answered. "I could run faster than this crate flies. I can't even see the river yet."

"All right," Kettner said. "We'll make a slow circle. Report when you sight the river."

A few minutes later Max reported again. "I've got the river dead ahead. I can see the bombed bridge at eleven o'clock. They're opening up on me down there. I'm grabbing some altitude."

"Hold on, boy!" Kettner yelled in his mike. "We're coming in!"

The Thunderbolts snarled across the lines. Fiery tracers met them and Kettner dipped his wings in quick maneuver.

"I've got it," Max's voice said in his headset. "Here's your checkpoint; a bombed house on the far side, a clump of trees on your side. Line them up and you can't miss. It's plenty hot up here. They know something's wrong—"

"Get away from there!" Kettner screamed. "Max! Max!"

"If there's time," Max's voice said. "A couple of fighters coming down river. They must've called 'em."

Kettner jabbed savagely at the throttle. He could see the dull glitter of the river in the distance. He could see the L-5 flying a tight circle, a criss-cross patchwork of tracers leaping toward the sky. And he saw the fighters.

The river broadened and swept toward them. A dark patch of woods tumbled down to its edge. Kettner lifted his eyes and found the bombed house. He looked once more toward the L-5 and saw the enemy fighters close in. It was too bad, but that's the way it was. The bridge was the important thing. Max would have to take care of himself until the Thunderbolts had unloaded.

The first tracers were reaching them from the river bank when a ship passed Kettner's wing. He saw the bombs leave its wings and tumble toward the woods. Instantly the P-47 shoe-laced away as if a hand had lifted it upward. It was Spangler, Kettner saw. The kid was throwing his Thunderbolt directly between the L-5 and the first Focke-Wulfe. In the next second Kettner smacked his bomb toggle.

As the weight left his wings, he jerked the stick back and made his sharp, turning climb toward the dogfight. He took one glimpse at boiling river; torn planks and wooden beams swirled in the wake of the exploding bombs. The rest of the flight roared down at spaced intervals; they wouldn't have to worry about a checkpoint any longer.

Kettner jerked his head around. Spangler's ship was biting a Focke-Wulfe's tail, hanging on. The other enemy fighter was coming in again; the L-5 seemed to stall before falling off on a wing. It jerked level again, and the German's fire passed beneath its fixed landing gear.

Kettner closed in on the 190. It pulled up and away before he had a chance for his shot. On the turn, he saw Spangler's guns wink flame and the Focke-Wulfe began to smoke. Then that sight passed out of his view and he thumbed his own trigger button as the second enemy fighter edged into his sight. It stalled, seemed to buckle. Chunks flew from the canopy. A yellow flame licked from beneath the cowlings; a great rush of black smoke engulfed the fighter. It turned completely over and crashed into the river, sending up its ragged column of water.

Kettner took a deep breath and looked around. The river was a boiling turbulence. The river's edge was littered with torn planks. He saw Spangler's Focke-Wulfe crash and burn, Spangler flying across to give it a last burst. Then something happened to the Thunderbolt; its left wing slumped low, out of control.

"Spangler!" Kettner yelled. "Straighten her out!"

The voice that answered sounded as if it had been squeezed through a long, narrow tube.

"Took a hit in the control cables. I can't grab any altitude. I—"

THE voice cut off abruptly. Kettner's throat became thick with his breathing. He watched the Thunderbolt settle toward a clearing next to the wood patch. It bellied in, hit in a shower of dust and smoke. Sudden stabs of flame came from the woods.

Kettner dipped the nose of his ship and went down, guns blazing. His steel slammed through the trees; the branches trembled as if a sudden gust of wind had caught them.

"Keep me covered!" a voice shouted, and it was Max.

"Don't try it!" Kettner yelled. He knew without thinking what Max intended doing. He flipped out of his dive and spotted the L-5 coming down on the far side of the clearing. The machine gun in the trees was opening up again. Kettner cursed and went down for another run. The rest of the flight joined in, concentrated on the woods.

At the end of the run, Kettner saw that the observation plane had landed. A figure dropped clear and ran in straight line to the downed Thunderbolt. The machine gun in the woods had stopped firing. Then Kettner saw the tank lumber from its concealed position on the river's edge. He made his run and came in strafing, knowing that it was futile, that his ammo would not dent the steel monster's armor.

He swept across again, seeing Max stagger in a half run toward the L-5, Spangler across his shoulders. Then Max was shoving the kid inside and climbing in after him. The L-5 began to move just as the tank's big gun lifted toward its target. A sheet of flame shot from the gun's muzzle. In that moment the L-5 swung wide, still rolling. Kettner held his breath, knowing it had been a miss. He strafed the tank once again as the L-5 lifted sluggishly into the air.

Kettner spoke into his mike. "You all right, Max?"

There was a chuckle. "Fine, Mike. Spangler's banged up a little, but he's all right, too."

There was a pause. Then another voice spoke and it was Spangler. It was a weak voice, but it had a lift to it.

"You know what this makes Max? A hero. A bloody hero."

There was the sound of a laugh, and then Max saying, "Listen to him, Mike. Me, a hero. The Ace, the big Ace."

"Pipe down, hero," Spangler said, "and get this lovely crate back to the base. I've got a date with a cold shower and a hot meal."

Kettner settled back and grunted his pleasure. The tightness was gone from Spangler's voice. Somehow, in crashing, he had licked his fear of low flying. The kid would probably never talk about it, but it was so. He'd be all right now. And the trouble between him and Max was wiped out. It usually worked out that way when a man met his problems head on, the way the kid had done in following that 190 down to the deck. He'd probably been scared to death, but that hadn't stopped him. Nothing would stop him from now on. He had it licked.

NO BAIL-OUT FOR BAILEY

By STEVE BROWN



The tender young pilot at the bomber controls felt the crew's eyes chilling his back. Maybe a side-trip through hell would warm them up!

CAPTAIN PILOT FREDDY DONHAM's small hands were moist on the column as he eased the heavily-laden bomber, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, into the sky. He sighed with relief and a tight smile came to his deceptively youthful face as the newly captured Rabaul airfield fell below and astern. But the smile was short-lived and the new crew member's slender shoulders moved slightly as if to throw off some invisible weight.

Freddy was recalling all too vividly the resentful attitude of the other bomber occupants. He could still feel their steady, calculating gaze boring into him as if the four of them were even now standing beside him. Well, he could not exactly blame them, he was thinking as he headed the bomber out over the Bismarck Sea. He could readily recall his own feeling of irritation toward the replacements in his original crew while operating in the African campaign. And from what he had

heard at the flying field, *Pistol-Packin' Mama's* crew had been together a long time, suffering their first loss in personnel when their pilot was severely wounded in the taking of Rabaul.

Freddy adjusted his flap mike and checked with each of the crew. All stations reported okay—and the men were all most polite in their form of addressing their "skipper".

Too damn' polite and exact, thought Freddy. Particularly as he had noted a definite lack of military ethics among the crew when conversing among themselves. For one thing, they invariably addressed one another as "Bailey". From this peculiar practise Freddy at first believed them to be all brothers—although their widely divergent looks belied any such relationship. Later he had learned their names and "Bailey" was not among them. When the tour desired to be particularly specific in designating a certain one of their

number, they simply tacked on the position he filled in the bomber; "Navigator Bailey", "Front-Gunner Bailey", etc.

Freddy shrugged his shoulders impatiently and drew himself erect in the seat. He glanced out and down past a wing's trailing edge and shuddered involuntarily. They were now out of sight of land and well on their way to Truk, their destination, and it was the wide and limitless expanse of water beneath the bomber that caused Freddy's sudden anxiety. "Scairt of water!" he muttered savagely. "And why? Why?" He banged a clenched fist against the column in impotent rage. "It'd be different if I'd at some time or other nearly drowned, but blast it, I never even came close to drowning!" He paused and again glanced apprehensively down at the water. "Oh, well," he consoled himself, "maybe *all* wartime flyers have, or develop, some phobia."

The hours and miles sped by as *Pistol Packin' Mama's* two Bristol Pegasus engines moved her steadily forward, and finally Truk could be sighted dead ahead.

"Pilot to crew," Freddy called into the mike. "We're approaching the target. Stand by your stations." One by one they all checked in with an, "Okay and ready, Skipper." There was a moment's silence and then suddenly Freddy's face flamed scarlet. One of the crew, in a high-pitched and simpering voice had spoken over the intercom: "*And a little child shall lead them!*"

Anger welled up in Freddy. He'd tell this Bailey outfit a few things for their own edification right now! He'd tell them of the D.F.C. he'd won while flying a bomber against Rommel's Africa Korps. He'd tell them of the time he'd come in on "*a wing and a prayer*" and the screaming belly of his ship and hadn't so much as scratched a man aboard. He'd—he'd—do nothing of the sort! Fighting down his anger he spoke into the flap mike: "Somebody's intercom switch is on. Turn it off."

Then the target, a large Jap supply station, loomed ahead. *Pistol Packin' Mama* was soon bouncing and jolting from the intense ack-ack fire coming up from below, but Freddy held her on course.

"Here we go for first run on target," he snapped into the mike. "Speed one-eighty. Altitude three hundred."

A few seconds later the big bomber lurched upward as the first bombs were released.

"Right on the nose, Bailey!" an exultant voice shouted over the intercom. Freddy brought the bomber about for a second run, fighting the column to keep her straight. Then disaster struck. An ack-ack shell tore into the right wing and exploded. The ship slid off into a sickening spin. Summoning all his skill, Freddy finally managed to straighten her out. No chance of a second run now. Better head back to base. Freddy jockeyed the column back and held his breath until they were out of the flak and over the sea. Then he glanced out at the damaged wing and a nauseous wave of fear swept over him. Thin spirals of smoke streamed from the hole in the wing and as he stared in horror, sparks of fire mingled with the streamers of smoke.

"We're on fire," he gasped into the mike, striving to keep hysteria from his voice.

"Yeah," replied one of the Baileys dryly. "*We* know." Then silence. They were waiting. The next move was up to Freddy. His mouth opened to give the order to bail out. Then the full significance of such a procedure swept over him. Terror shone in his eyes as he stared down at the black, tossing sea. He knew he could never bring himself to jump into the water but the other men *must* have their chance. Freddy bit down hard on his underlip before trusting his voice.

"Better jump, men," he said. "That hole in the wing may burst into flames any minute now."

"And you, Skipper?"

IN HIS mind Freddy could see the faintly cynical expressions on the four Bailey's faces as they waited for his reply. He swallowed hard and again glanced at the sea. "I'll—I'll stay with the ship," he managed to say with no more than a trace of quaver in his voice.

There was a brief pause. Then: "That's good enough for us, too," said the Bailey

spokesman. "Any plans, Skipper?"

No, he had no plans. Nothing but a frenzied, unreasoning desire to postpone the horror of jumping into the sea; nothing but a consuming fear that made him dizzy, that forced his hands to grip the column and his eyes to stare out at the smoking wing . . .

"There are a couple of bombs left," spokesman Bailey was saying matter-of-factly. "Shall we dump them and lighten the plane, Skipper?"

It took some few moments for the words to penetrate Freddy's fear-stricken mind. But finally some semblance of reason came to him. He *must* make some sort of effort.

"They'd make a jolly splash in the water down there," drawled the same voice over the intercom.

"Okay," Freddy said, "dump them." Then suddenly the words, "They'd make a jolly splash," repeated themselves in his mind and with them came a fantastic plan of action. "Hold it!" he snapped. "Don't drop the bombs until I give the word."

Freddy's eyes had lost their glaze of terror and a faint tinge of color returned to his greenish-hued face as he shoved the column forward and nosed the bomber toward the sea. When barely skimming the wave-tops, he gave the order: "Now!" he barked into the mike.

"Bombs away!"

Pistol Packin' Mama surged upward with the lightening of the load and Freddy, his teeth clenched and body tense, whipped the big bomber into a steep bank and came swiftly about as a geyser of water from

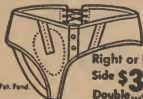
the exploding bombs shot skyward. Straining forward as if to lend speed to the plane, Freddy headed the bomber for the column of water before him. Glancing quickly from the flaming hole to the geyser, he sliced the damaged wing squarely into the now swiftly receding column of water. The bomber started to swing in an arc as the wing knifed into the water but Freddy gunned the right motor and straightened her out.

Carefully, gingerly, he drew the column back. Then he forced himself to glance out toward the damaged wing. He closed his eyes and muttered a prayer of heartfelt thanksgiving; the fire was out! Beyond the charred and dripping edges of fabric and tangle of metal in the hole itself, the wing framework appeared but little damaged. *Pistol Packin' Mama* would again bring 'em back alive!

An elation swept through Freddy such as he had never experienced before. He patted the column affectionately as he tilted it slightly to compensate for the right wing-drag. Then suddenly he was listening intently. One of the Baileys was speaking over the intercom. "Hey, Bailey! *Pistol Packin' Mama's* got herself a pilot!" There was a moment's pause, then: "Nice goin', Skipper Bailey!"

For a few moments Freddy sat grinning with sheer delight. Then a mischievous gleam came into his eyes. "I've gotta get even with those Baileys for that 'little child' business," he murmured and, cupping his flap mike closer he said gruffly: "Skipper Bailey to crew. Somebody's intercom switch is on. Turn it off!"

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The Dragon-Queen Awakes!

By WALT SHELDON

I GUESS YOU COULD SAY THAT I was dead. Oh, sure, my heart went skipping along as usual, and I breathed and moved and walked and talked. But there was one thing I didn't do—couldn't do—and as far as I was concerned that meant I didn't live.

This was how I found myself in Canton, China three years after the war. Dead—yet still wearing the dog tag which said LAWSON, JEFFREY L. O-561101, and gave a permanent address on Long Island. Because every once in a while I'd finger that

dog tag, or look at it, and remember when I'd been alive. Sometimes the thing would backfire, though, and then I'd remember a Mitchell bomber in 1945, somewhere over Hunan Province, Central China.

I'd remember that night with sickening clarity . . .

We were in cloud so thick that it amazed us just to see the propellers chew through it. But they did, and the double-row Wrights snarled happily, pulling us south-westward away from our bombing mission at Hankow. The flak had been medium,



A deafening blast of gunfire came suddenly from the trees.

What sinister thing was flinging its evil web into those flaming China skies, snaring helpless birdmen like war-shocked Jeff Lawson? And what was luscious Lark Vallon doing in the deadly center of this vicious net?

and not accurate; we'd come away without a scratch. We were beginning to think ourselves pretty superior and lucky fellows, we crewmen of the bomber called "Jeff's Mutt" . . .

Beside me there was a Lieutenant Mike Giannini, opera lover and co-pilot; a little, dark, intense guy with snapping eyes. He loved things or he hated them, never in-between. He also sported the largest handlebar mustache in China—fourteen inches from tip to tip.

Now one of the things Mike despised highly was popular music. Music for him stopped with Verdi—and I think began there, too. So, as usual, he groaned and made faces that night when I fiddled with the radio and tuned in the Canton radio. Throaty boudoir tones singing "Embraceable You" came into our headsets.

"Baa! Like a dying cow," said Mike. "That cow," I told him, grinning, "can die on my doorstep anytime." I had listened to this voice before—it belonged to

one Lark Vallon, whom the Japanese always introduced as the "loveliest songbird in New Asia." Between her selections they would try to tell us what suckers we were to oppose the mighty Imperial Armies, and so forth.

Mike shifted in his seat and gazed moodily at the stuff outside of the window. "She's probably a repulsive old harridan in a flannel nightshirt," he said.

"She's beautiful," I insisted. "Anybody with a voice like that has to be beautiful."

"Okay," Mike shrugged. "When we move into Canton after the war you can have the privilege of hanging her."

I just laughed at him and went on listening.

The cool, thick cloud kept going by the engine nacelles, became red for a moment near the exhausts, then slipped back into nothingness again. The auto-pilot was on; I stretched way out and lighted a cigarette. Except for a slight war all around, life was good. And the future looked even better. China's weather and terrain was giving me experience that would enable me afterward to fly anything from the Alleghanies to the Andes. I had enough of the usual bright colored ribbons to impress the public which, in business, you've got to do. The insignia was known to them, too—the winged, horned imp sailing through the clouds and grinning diabolically at the world in general. This was the mark of our Group; we called ourselves the "Flying Devils." We'd had good publicity, and the airline I meant to start after the war wouldn't let any of that go to waste. It wouldn't be long now before the dream of my life—my own airline—would come true.

I GUESS this big love affair of mine, this passion for flying, began in the days when I could hardly walk, let alone avigate. Dad was a barnstormer—one of the old, horizon-eyed boys who wrestled Jennies and De Havilands and makes you never heard of around the country, giving acrobatic demonstrations and short hops for from three to five bucks. I often wonder if the boys who write the air histories will give the big chunk of credit due these lonely obsessed, inspired flyers. They

really brought flying to Main Street, U.S.A.

Living with history, however, has its bad points. Sometimes, as I remember, the week's food money, or a bit laid aside for new shoes, went to repair a broken strut or bent pitot tube. Dad was an automobile mechanic by trade, but I guess his shop was closed maybe half the days out of the year while he went picking up handkerchiefs with his wingtips at State Fairs and Carnivals. I don't know how Mom stood up under it all those years. But she did. She grew old, and not unbeautiful. She never batted an eyebrow when I started trying to solo at a tender and illegal age . . .

Kelly Field was a breeze, although I did have some trouble holding my cockiness down. I already had a commercial license before I started turning square corners and saying "Yes, sir, no, sir, no excuse, sir" to upper classmen. Luckily I'd been brought up not to shoot off my mouth too much, and luckily I'm the kind that can fade into the back rank—you know, sort of medium, with a knobby build, sandy hair, sandy skin, grey sandy eyes.

Mike looked at the stuffed cloud outside and said, "It's still there."

I grinned. "Just more evidence that the lieutenant in charge of the weather section is an unmitigated liar."

Mike said, "I better try to raise the base," and switched the lever from Radio Compass to Command. I nodded, took the auto-pilot off and put my hands to the wheel again. I wasn't particularly worried, not even then. I'd always managed to bring Jeff's Mutt home before, and if Tinglung, our base, was socked in, I'd simply head for our alternate, picked out by careful planning before the mission.

The news from the base wasn't so good. "We're closed tighter'n a drum, Navajo Six," answered the tower. "You better push on to your alternate."

"Roger," said Mike. He glanced at me for a second across his left mustache, making an unspoken question. I nodded, and then he said to the microphone: "Check the Kwei-Tow weather for us, too. Will you?"

"Will do. Standby," the tower crackled.

I flew on, lazily, unthinkingly, checking my instruments with a kind of instinct that worked from the margins of my vision. Nothing to worry about yet. Tough instrument approaches didn't bother me, nor knotty navigation problems. And one of the things that helped make life good was the absolute confidence the crew of Jeff's Mutt had in their pilot. Best damn crew in the theater, they were. Sure I know, all pilots say that—but they really were. Zirosh, the crew chief, was a round-headed, blue-eyed mechanical genius from the Slav country around Wilkes-Barre. Thatcher, senior radio and waist gunner, had a crew haircut and a Harvard degree. O'Malley, his assistant was taking time out from a career as a concert tenor. Yancy, the tail gunner was as slender as a Tennessee pine, and about as articulate. Best damn crew in the theater.

"Hello, Navajo Six—hello—do you read me?"

There was a new voice in the headsets. A gentle, bass whisper with a Mississippi drawl sanding off the edges of the words. I recognized it immediately as belonging to Colonel Ghurka Purcell, the commander of our group. It was Elmer T. Purcell, really, but ever since he made a one-man air force out of himself over the Assam Valley he had been dubbed "The Ghurka". This alluded to the sharp, curved Indian knife which is never drawn unless it intends to taste blood. It would be like that leather-faced, gentle-mannered old hell-eater to be staying up in the tower all night watching his baby eagles come to roost.

I took the mike. "Loud and clear, big chief," I said, grinning into it.

There was an answering grin in the Ghurka's voice. "It's about three-eighths and five hundred at Kwei-Tow. I think you can make it. Good luck."

"Roger, and thank you," I said. And Mike and I, both picturing the old warrior's worried, granite face, traded smiles. He grabbed for the chart and the E-6-B, meanwhile, to check our new course to the alternate landing field.

Thirty minutes later Navajo Six was still in the soup. Outside it was thicker and greyer than ever, and a film of rain

blurred the windshield, made a soft patter on the ship's metal skin. I looked at the clock and the compass, and frowned. I wasn't worrying yet, I was just getting set for a possible touchy landing problem. I asked Mike to raise the Kwei-Tow tower.

He got it some seconds later. What I heard brought a quick frown. "We hear you flubbing around up there," said the operator, "but we're closed in solid down here. Can't even see the ground from where I sit. Might raise by daylight, though—"

THERE was a short, taut silence in the cockpit. Mike finally took a deep breath, tweaked one seven-inch mustache and said, "Looks like the Ghurka gave you a bum steer, Jeff."

I shook my head. "Not his fault. All he can do is check the weather report. It may have been garbled. Or maybe Kwei-Tow was okay when he sent us here."

"Okay," said Mike, "What do we do?"

There's a big chill that starts right down below your stomach and creeps through your chest in moments like that. What do we do? You're the pilot—the airplane commander—and the lives of four other men are on your fingertips. It's even worse when you know that those men have absolute confidence in you. That whatever you say goes.

I checked the lowering fuel needles. Enough to flub around for a while, but not enough to find another airport. I stared out of the window again, blinking at the thick stuff, and wondering if perhaps it didn't thin out just a bit near the ground.

"It's clearing some," the tower called suddenly. "We've about one-eighth now, but the ceiling's almost on top of us."

Okay, Jeff Lawson. What do we do?

I knew that Mike Giannini was looking at me, waiting. I knew that Zirosh, Thatcher, O'Malley and Yancey were all tied in to the interphone, waiting too.

I knew that I could order a bail-out and not even the ghost of Bleriot would criticize that decision. Yet I was Jeff Lawson, wasn't I? The guy who was cradled in a cockpit, who learned his ABCs from the parts of an airplane. A B-25 cost plenty,

and more than that, this isolated theater needed them bad. This last, of course, was just a bit of thinking deliberately tailored to what I really wanted to do all the time. I wanted to bring that ship and its crew down together—intact.

"I'm taking her in, Mike," I told the dark co-pilot. "Tell the crew jumping's up to them."

Mike nodded briefly. He switched to RC, put the mike to his mustache and passed on the information. It took them all about five seconds to decide that they'd ride her down . . .

We contacted the tower again and made plans. The operator didn't argue, but I could sense the doubt in his voice. I smiled a little. He didn't know that Jeff Lawson—Mr. Aviation—was at the helm of Navajo Six.

And so the long, painful process of descent began.

From the ground a constant signal was sent out on the proper band so that the radio compass could be used for a box approach. I monitored this with both my ears and the needle, and Mike's voice kept contact. "I can hear your engines," the tower would call, and then he'd give our position in relation to the runway. Occasionally, when we got off the beam, he'd yell corrections at us. At times I'd call for my position to double check. Blind man's buff, with oblivion for the booby prize.

We took one complete approach without landing, first. At two thousand feet we described a complete rectangle around the field, checking the direction of the signal at each turn to get our bearings. When the box was made, we banked on what we hoped would be final approach. I dipped the nose, took a deep breath, and crossed my fingers. The fog swirled up into our landing lights. I glued my eyes to the altimeter, whose pressure setting the tower had given us and, when the indicator put us about fifty feet above the runway, I leveled off.

There was a glimpse of the strip below and of a fuzzy redlight over to the left.

"That's it! That's it!" the tower yelled. "Right on the button! Do it again, and drinks are on me!"

"Let's go," I said to Mike. I pulled up

for a climb.

Mike brought his under lip out and chewed nervously on his mustache. He didn't say anything; he just gripped his seat and kept staring at the instrument panel.

I grinned. If the visibility and ceiling held just about as it was, I was sure I could make it now.

Fifteen minutes later Navajo Six dipped down out of the night for another box approach. Her engines hacked and back-fired and her gear flaps reached for the earth like the talons and pinions of a bird of prey. Her exhaust bled fire into the mist. Just below her that mist became jagged, shredded stuff sweeping across the land. I frowned—a little thicker, it seemed. The landing spots glared ahead, trying to pierce it—

The vague mass of the runway slammed up out of nowhere and suddenly filled the windshield. I moved the stick and throttle quickly. I remember thinking—Mike Giannini, Zirosh, Thatcher, O'Malley, Yancy—they all stuck with me. Best damn crew in the theater. I remember noting, even in that bare instant, that I was calm enough now, but my knees would probably become jelly after it was all over. I slammed my mouth shut.

Vmp! Vmp! went the tires.

The ship bounced. Cockeyed forces clawed at my stomach from all directions. I tried to work the rudder pedals, adjusting my movements to the way they became mushier and mushier as the ship lost speed. We were in the air again. We hadn't come down from that bounce yet.

"Look out!" yelled Mike.

That was the last thing I remembered before the terrible, grinding crash and the big heavy blackness came over everything.

IT seemed years before I knew about things again. It seemed I lived another separate, crazy lifetime, and there was nothing but a lot of jumbled, swirling impressions. There was crackling fire in one part of it . . . there were hands tugging, to get me out of a narrow space. There was a quiet room that I felt somehow must be a white room; there were muttering anxious voices. Someone was

telling me to breathe deeply and I tasted sweet, sickening stuff.

I woke up in a base hospital far to the rear, and one of the first things they told me was that I would fly again soon. It wasn't until some days later, when I was strong enough, that they told me the rest of it.

Zirosh and Thatcher had died in the flames of that crackup.

They were wrong about my flying again soon.

For I died with that news; way far inside of me I died as dead as a man can be.

II

IT WAS 1949, AND I WAS pouring hot tea with trembling hands.

I had an idea that if it had been whiskey my hands would have presently stopped trembling. But it wasn't for me, anyway. It was for the fat Chink in the brocaded gown and tweed coat up forward in seat 5. The one with an emerald on his fat finger. I screwed the top on the big thermos again, stowed it back with the cigarettes and chocolate bars, grabbed a paper cup with two thicknesses of napkin, to keep it from burning my hands, and then stumbled forward through the tin door.

It was less noisy in the passenger compartment. Insulated. Everything had been done to make these Catalina amphibis the last word in passenger comfort. And for whom?

I looked around me as I lurched along. A couple of prissy Europeans, the government service type, buzzing over a brief case. A hungry-eyed Filipino staring straight ahead, too scared to look out of the ports at the sea below or the dim, bluish China coast to the right. A thin Chinese party in a dark, cheap suit and big smoked glasses. Beside him a bulky, puffy-eyed bald character. The bald character had one leg stuck in the aisle—I almost tripped over it, and then saw that it wasn't a leg; it was a peg of solid ivory.

I brought the fat millionaire his tea and he took it from me with that cold, automatic politeness you use toward a servant.

That was what really hurt more than anything else. You can say what you want

about the dignity of menial labor and all that and for that matter I'd done my share of pick-swinging, car-washing, dish-wiping and just plain panhandling since the war. But being in the air. Manila-bound out of Canton, with the engines humming on the pyloned wing and the low fleece clouds dotting the navy blue sea below—being here where I belonged, yet holding the job I held—that was what really hurt.

I left the fat Chinese—respectfully, mind you—straightened the skirts of my powder blue tunic with a half-hearted stab at dignity, then pushed on to the pilot's compartment.

"Steward!" called a voice behind me. It was a thin, rather rasping voice; I turned and saw that the slender man in the smoked glasses had raised his finger.

"Yes, sir?" There I was, hovering over his seat like a Ritz waiter. Me, Jeff Lawson, Mr. Aviation.

"We—on course? Evly-sing okay? All light?" He fumbled for the words and tripped over some of the uvular sounds. It struck me as rather a phony performance—not quite like a Chinese who really couldn't speak English—but I had too many other things on my mind to worry about that just then.

I assured the thin party that, aeronautically speaking, things couldn't be better. And I scowled after I turned from him. A worry-wart. There's one on every trip. I made up my mind to ignore him as much as possible on the way to Manila.

At the door of the flight deck I paused just a moment to stare at the insignia stenciled there. There was a little imp of Satan, arms outstretched and holding wings to take him over the clouds. The lettering said:

FLYING DEVIL AIRLINES,
TONK-TONG, CHINA

That was another hard part of it. Having to face the insignia I'd dreamed would be mine. Three, four long years ago I'd dreamed that until the day I recovered from the crash at Kwei-Tow and the morning report marked me Hospital to Duty. I'd climbed into an AT-6 at the field to try my wings again. And then I saw that the controls were covered with a red haze and there was a banshee wailing

in my ears . . . a bull-roaring voice from the center of my brain saying "No—no—you can't fly!" My fingers and knees had trembled. My brow had iced with sweat. "No, no, you can't fly," that voice had kept saying, "This is how you killed two men, murdered them . . ."

And now Ghurka Purcell—the man who had sent me to that crash—the man I hated beyond anything in the world—owned that insignia, operated the airline I had dreamed about. And I worked for him. As a steward. An airgoing short-order cook and male nurse.

I shook my head viciously, dislodging the memories. I pushed on into the pilot's compartment.

MIKE Giannini's mustache had long since been trimmed down to normal size. He looked up, grinned from behind it, making his white teeth seem whiter. "Hi, Jeff!" he said. "How's your flock back there?"

"Serene," I said. I managed to grin back. I always had to force a grin with Mike. It's hard to be steward on the same ship with a man who was once your co-pilot. No matter how sensible you tell yourself you're going to be—it's hard.

First Pilot Mike Giannini turned to his co-pilot. Havershaw was his name; he was an energetic lad with cropped blonde hair who had been in training up until V-J day. He smiled a lot and he was eager, and he was always asking about the war. The shooting war. "What was it really like?" he would want to know. Tiresome, but a nice kid.

Mike said to him, "You can go back now and have that coffee. Jeff here'll relieve you for a while—"

"Huh?" said Havershaw, turning and blinking. And then he nodded as though he'd suddenly remembered how they'd planned it. A put up job. It couldn't be any more obvious.

"Hold it," I said, stepping forward. "Forget trying to shove a little flying time on me. I'm not in the mood anyway." I managed another grin. "Had a tough night last night—"

"Again, Jeff?" Mike's dark eyes got very liquid.

"Don't be a jerk," I said, shrugging. "I'm old enough to take care of myself. A few drinks—what the hell. I don't need a sound mind in a sound body like you guys do. Just strength enough to pour some fat Slopie a cup of tea—"

Mike just looked.

"Oh, hell, I'm sorry Mike," I said. "Give me a cigarette, will you?"

It still wasn't the same between Mike and me; not like it had been back in the old days. How could it be? Mike—and I didn't know whether to praise or hate him for it—had arranged for the steward's job. He'd heard I'd bummed my way to China after drifting awhile back home, and he'd found me in a gin den in Shanghai. He'd spent a day sobering me up, then dragged me down to Tonk-Tong, the Canton suburb where the Ghurka operated his airline. It had been queer, meeting the Ghurka again. I wanted to fly at his throat for sending me to Kwei-Tow that cloud-bound night—yet I needed what he offered me, needed it bad. It was more than just a job so I could live; some instinct kept telling me that the only way I'd ever lick my problem was to get into the air somehow and fight at close quarters . . .

I thought of all these things as I took the first long gratifying drag of the cigarette; I saw Mike still watching me and I knew that he must be thinking along the same lines.

"We're on course," chirped Havershaw's boyish voice. He was leaning to look beyond the hull at the scattered group of islands below. He made the perfectly unnecessary remark, of course, because all the silent staring between Mike and me had bothered him.

Mike said, "That's fine, kid."

I stared over Havershaw's shoulder at the island group. They were called Tu Yok Nan—the Pirate Islands—because they had served as a haven for sea outlaws and their junks for several centuries. They were just southwest of the Si-Kiang delta, where Canton and Hong-Kong lay, and served as a good initial check point on the Manila route. I gazed at them, and without realizing it, started to calculate the drift for the wind velocity and direction. Then, bitterly, I remembered that I was

only the steward and didn't have to do things like that—

THE DOOR from the passenger cabin opened suddenly and swiftly. The thin oriental—the one with the anxieties and the dark glasses—barged in. The worry wart. I started to step forward and soothe him back to where he belonged, and then I saw that he had a very large and very ugly Mauser pistol in his hand.

"Hey! Put that down!" I said. It was the only thing I could think of.

He kept coming and there was something in the way he moved that told me he meant business. I started to back away slowly.

He spoke—and the comic pidgin accent was gone. His thin, harsh voice said: "In there, buddy." He motioned at the navigator's table with his pistol.

Something bulky loomed behind him, and for a moment I thought it might be help for us—but it turned out to be the barrel-chested, puffy-eyed Chinese with the ivory leg. He had a Mauser in his hand, too.

"Don't be crazy," I said, "You can't fly this plane without pilots—"

"I got news for you," said the thin character. "I'm a pilot, too." He brushed past me.

Mike and Havershaw, up front, had just begun to get the drift of all this. Mike was half-turned in his seat, staring wide-eyed at the man who pushed toward him, and Havershaw—pale and tense—was rising from the right hand chair.

The bulky bandit stopped and held his gun on me. I stared with sick fascination at the black hole in the end of it.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" I heard Mike say . . .

There was a sudden flash of movement over by the co-pilot's seat. I turned my head partly just in time to see what happened—and then wished I hadn't. Young Havershaw grabbed himself an iron control lock; he started to swing it. The Mauser sounded loud and terrifying, even with the thrum of the engines. Havershaw dropped back with a widening stain on his powder blue uniform. There was an expression of utter surprise and bafflement on his face.

As Havershaw slumped against the co-pilot's wheel, Mike grabbed for his own control and wrestled with it. "Get him off there!" he shouted. The airplane began to lurch violently. Her nose went down, way down, and she skidded off on one wing. I waited for the spin—

Then I saw that the gyrations of the ship had suddenly thrown the ivory-legged one off balance. He was sprawling back toward the passenger door. His gun hand was busy trying to support himself.

Be a hero, Jeff Lawson. Go ahead. A damnfool hero. That's the least you can do. Go on, Jeff Lawson, take a chance.

The thin character with the dark glasses had his back toward me. I jumped him. He must have figured on it; he turned at about the same time—and we grappled. He had his gun arm raised, the weapon pointed upward, and I grabbed that wrist with thumb down, then tried to spin it around into the small of his back. But he knew that trick, and a few others apparently. His free fingers came forward in a hard, six-inch blow that caught me just below the notch of the ribs. I felt air leave me; I felt a paralyzing pain. My hand slid down his forearm, the fingers caught in his dark sleeve and ripped some of it away.

There was an odd tattoo on his wrist. I noticed it, I suppose, because my senses were keyed-up, sharpened. It wasn't blue like most tattoos, but a rather brilliant red. It was a typically Chinese design, made with a few artful strokes. To me it looked like a butterfly with the talons of a hawk or eagle stretched out below it.

The thin party saw me glance at the tattoo, and then started fighting with renewed fury. Curiously, all this time his dark-lensed glasses stayed on him. He made himself into a small bundle of tigers—and I think it was his mistake. That was how he left the middle open. I slipped a hard punch forward, and when he bent from it I rocked one to his jaw. His guard dropped completely. I hit him again, and again—right on the button—until my knuckles felt as though they were mashed. His knees went on strike and he crumpled to the floor.

All this time the ivory-legged character

had been very much on my mind, too. As soon as I saw that the thin one wouldn't cause any trouble for a while, I whirled to face the other; I crouched to a kind of defense position.

THAT'S what saved me—that crouch.

As my head came around bright flashes exploded in front of it—kettle drums sounded in my ears—burned powder stung my cheek and bit at my nostrils. Not knowing whether I was hit or not, not even daring to find out, I dove for his legs. He went down again. That ivory peg of his didn't allow him much balance, and he went down heavily. I could hear him grunt painfully as he hit. I crawled atop him, made a wild grab for the Mauser, and got it. I twisted his hand off to one side.

Then my face was close to his and I was staring into those puffy eyes and feeling hot, leek-laden breath in my face. I saw pock-marks and wrinkles that I hadn't noticed before. And I found out that Ivory-leg was as strong as a water buffalo. His left arm and shoulder rumbled up under my palm, lifting me with them. The gun hand, which I held spread-eagle, started to come back. I strained and knew I wouldn't be able to hold it. My lungs started to ache. My teeth ground into each other. I could hear Ivory-leg's own breath sawing in and out.

And then—because he was putting too much strain into his right arm—the gun suddenly slipped from his fingers. I was faster than Ivory-leg, much faster. I pounced on the gun. I took it by the barrel and swung it in a vicious arc through the air. It sounded like a bat hitting a baseball. Ivory-leg fell back with a welt and a gash on his bald head; he groaned and squirmed. I hit him again and he went out.

I got up. I was trembling, breathing hard and I knew I'd stagger if I tried to walk. I turned and saw that Mike Giannini was still sitting in the pilot's seat, staring straight ahead and looking pale and stiff. I scooped up both Mausers and stepped toward Mike. "They—won't bother us for a while," I panted.

"Got—got to land her," said Mike in a

strange, tight voice. His skin was oyster color. His dark eyes were ringed with white and he kept staring straight ahead.

"What's the matter, Mike?" I bent over him. I saw the blood on the top of his ear then, saw where just a quarter-inch of flesh had been scored away.

"It was damn close, damn close," Mike muttered in a queer, tight voice.

I knew then that he'd either get sick or pass out at any moment. And I didn't blame him. Watching flack bursts float by and having guns go off in the same cockpit with you are two different things. Without a word I moved to the co-pilot's seat and started to wrestle Havershaw from it. He was heavy and clumsy; I was puffing furiously by the time I had him in the aisle. I dropped into the co-pilot's chair and lifted my hands towards the controls—

I'd done all this without thinking much about it, remember. But now, abruptly, as I started to reach for the wheel—I began trembling all over again!

My skin became wet and cold. One drop of frigid sweat trickled from my forehead and got caught in the tuft of one eyebrow. My stomach commenced turning over and over.

You can fly, you know how, said one part of me. *You're a murderer, you killed two men because you thought you could fly,* said another. "Dammit," I muttered back softly, "the Ghurka sent me there to that socked-in field. It wasn't my fault . . ." Then I realized that I was talking aloud, and I shut my mouth tight with quick embarrassment.

Mike's strained, hollow voice called to me. "Just—watch airspeed—instruments—I'll take her down—"

I nodded dumbly.

All the way down I followed through on the controls and tried to fight the paralysis that was gripping me. The ship swung about gently for an approach into the wind, and the horizon and the shapes of the Pirate Islands moved smoothly off the wing tips. We were near the sea now. I saw the sails and wakes of several coastal junks. I looked over my shoulder, and glanced at the unconscious bandits. By the time Mike throttled back to land the thin

party had begun to writhe and moan, and now he was shaking his head, trying to get to his feet.

I turned again and watched us come in. Mike brought the Cat down as though he were dropping a feather in a bowl of cream. There was barely a trace of step-back bump as the hull settled. Then the spray was flying on either side, spattering the struts with a soft brushing noise. We were coasting to a stop.

I realized that I still had one hand poised above the wheel—trembling. I'd been following Mike's movements; they seemed so familiar, so easy. Yet I couldn't do it myself. I couldn't.

We had landed near a brown-sailed junk, and this swung about and headed toward us as we stopped. Mike jazzed the throttles to clear the cylinders of oil. Then he cut the switches.

And having accomplished that he slumped suddenly over the wheel in a dead faint.

THERE was a scuffling and scrambling just behind me. I whirled, cursing myself for relaxing my watch, and fully expected a sudden attack. But there was no attack. The thin party and his peg-legged friend were pushing through the tiny door into the passenger hatch, instead.

"Hey!" I yelled. I grabbed one of the Mausers and scrambled from the seat. I tripped on the step-down, sprawled and dropped the Mauser. I recovered it and got up again. When I opened the door I saw that the aisle behind it was full of excited, milling passengers. The rear hatch on the port side was open.

"They go out! They go in water!" the fat Chinese in the brocaded gown was yelling at me. He was up front, more or less sparking the riot. I swore and I tried to push my way through that mass of passengers, and got tangled worse than ever.

"Sit down! Sit down everybody!" I shouted, pushing and elbowing.

I finally got through somehow. At the hatch I stopped short, stood in the shade of the big wing and looked out over the

water. Both the thin man and Peg-leg were swimming out there, neither of them much more than a hundred feet from the airplane. How the bulky character with the artificial foot managed it, I don't know, but he seemed to be pulling along better than his companion. The junk I'd seen was bearing down to pick them up.

Well, I couldn't shoot fish in a barrel. A hangover from the days when I collected Sunday School attendance pins, I guess. The junk would pick up our airgoing pirate friends, we'd radio the news, and the proper authorities, or the Gurka, or somebody would take care of it from there. Anyway, I had a nearly hysterical flock of passengers to tend to. I shrugged, dropped the gun in the pocket of my tunic and turned back into the airplane.

III

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING IT was necessary to face the Gurka. There was no way out of it.

I sat in his office, where I'd been summoned, and he faced me from behind his big carved ebony desk. The place was done in the style of a mandarin's study with silk embroidered Changsha tapestries gracing the walls, and an exquisitely made decorative map of China behind his chair. I could never look at it without thinking that something like it might have been mine if the Gurka hadn't sent me to Kwei-Tow that night . . .

"Jeff," said Gurka Purcell quietly, "you really ought to have tried to hang on to those two fellas."

That was his way. Tell you softly and sadly so that you felt like six kinds of a heel. He'd had the nerve to talk to me like that after the B-25 crack up. I stared back at him flatly, taking in his battered countenance. It looked as though it had been lifted from the side of an abandoned rock quarry. His eyes were deeply set—basalt in quartz—and his hair was a tight grey skull cap jammed atop his oversize head.

This was the man who had developed Flying Devil Airlines despite all the old China hands who predicted failure—who assured him that a corrupt government

and omnipotent Cantonese racketeers would never let him get started. This was the man who had built the hangar and the passenger terminal and the mandarin's study in Tonk-Tong, just south of Canton, and who operated from here the Hong-Kong shuttle and the Manila run.

This was the man who might have admitted his mistake that night, and freed me.

I wondered if the quiet hate in my eyes was visible. I reached for a cigarette and said, "There was a hell of a lot to do, Ghurka. There wasn't much time to hang on to them."

His eyes flicked up and down—over me—for just an instant. "Sure, Jeff," he said. "It was a tough spot." But he meant that somebody else might have kept those pirates prisoner—somebody who didn't fail habitually as I did. He opened a teakwood cigarette box and took a long Russian cigarette from it. "We relayed the description of those two men up and down the coast. But nobody's reported 'em. My guess is that the junk belonged to 'em, was waiting to pick 'em up."

"Maybe," I said. My cheeks were burning. I wanted to get out. I wanted to get to my favorite bar—a little place in the Old City run by a White Russian woman named Mama Fufu. I wanted the raw, steadying feel of whisky in my throat.

The Ghurka swiveled suddenly and stared at the map behind him. "You know, the way I figure it," he said, "is that they've got a base or contact somewhere here in the Pirate Islands. They'd have to have someplace to take the plane after they landed it. Someplace to hold everybody for ransom, which I expect was their idea."

"Uh huh," I said disinterestedly. I puffed smoke.

"The police aren't much help," mused the Ghurka, swiveling back. "Hong-Kong says it's out of their jurisdiction and the Chinese—" he shrugged. He frowned at his cigarette. "Maybe the best thing we can do is take matters into our own hands, I'm thinking."

"How?" I said.

"Find their damn island and shoot it up for them," said the Ghurka. Then he

clamped his jaws shut. He looked like his own publicity pictures when he did that.

"Okay," I said, getting up. "I hope you find it."

"Wait a minute, Jeff," he said. "I'm thinking you might like the job. Give you a—er—change from what you're doing."

My head came up slightly. "What do you mean, Ghurka?"

"We still have our utility ship—the Seagull. I'm having it hundred-houred right now. Be just the thing to make a reconnaissance."

I began to get interested. I forgot for a moment that I couldn't fly, put my fingertips on the desk and said, "Okay. We reconnoiter. We find their island. And then?"

"I'm making arrangements," said the Ghurka, smiling faintly, "for some twenty pound frag bombs. And I'm having the shop build racks for them now. The Seagull's armed, as you know, and they're stuffing ammunition into her this minute."

"Well!" I raised my eyebrows. "Sounds almost like the old days."

He nodded. "Mike'll fly her," he said, "and you can ride as observer."

I tried to keep my scowl from getting too deep. "Uh—sure," I said. "Sure. I'd like a crack at it."

"Six-thirty tomorrow morning she'll be ready," said the Ghurka. He began to gather his paper work toward him—the signal that the interview was over. He looked up once more. "I—er—don't have to remind you to be here, do I? Six-thirty sharp."

IT WAS clear enough what he really meant. He meant for me not to go off on one of my binges. To show up and be sober when I did. If I hadn't wanted desperately to fly that mission I'd have leaned across the desk and pushed his face in. As it was I waved casually, muttered, "See you," then turned and went out of the door.

My cheeks were still burning.

Well, it so happened that I kept out of Mama Fufu's bar most of the day. If that's any excuse. I hopped the company jeep, which nobody was using at the moment, into Canton, did some shopping,

wrote some letters, read some magazines and generally loafed. It was my day off—and on my day off I always felt most bored and unhappy. When I worked I was at least in the air. And it was only in the air that I'd learn—somehow, someday—to fly again.

Supper time rolled around. I began to tell myself that nothing would taste quite as good as some of Mama Fufu's Niuw Goo Yok—sweet and sour pork. That was the only reason I wanted to go there, I told myself.

The old gal herself greeted me fondly from behind the bar as I sauntered in. She wasn't Chinese—White Russian, I'd heard—but her celestial costumes, 'some-what slanted eyes and definitely oriental manner made you look twice before you realized that. She probably could have played Methuselah's mother, yet she was a long way from being senile. "Hallo, Jeffy boy!" she said in her curious accent, which was doubly grotesque because she insisted using what she fondly believed was American slang. "How come you not cooling heels in Manila tonight, hey?"

"We turned back. Engine trouble," I said. I hoped it sounded casual. Not that I mistrusted Mama Fufu—but in South China reticence is a good general rule. I leaned on the bar, looked up the row of shiny bottles, then sighed suddenly and said, "A spot of bourbon, I guess. Just one before dinner."

"Sure okay. Just one," said Mama Fufu, looking at me sharply. I didn't miss the sarcasm in her voice. She moved quickly and erratically like a small, wrinkled bird, and all the time her tiny dark eyes seemed to glitter and sparkle as though she were constantly sizing you up—planning way ahead of you. Mama Fufu was a Canton fixture; she'd been here before the Japs, during the Japs, and after the Japs. No one could ever seem to think of her real name, and the cognomen—Mama Fufu—was merely a favorite Chinese expression which means literally "Horse-horse, tiger-tiger" but is used to say that things are "so-so"—"not bad, not good."

Part of Mama Fufu's charm for me was the fact that my credit seemed to be always good in her place.

She poured my drink and I let it sit there for a moment, staring at it and feeling guilty and gratified all at once. I knew that Mama Fufu's bright little eyes were on me. I had a feeling that she must know all about me, the details of the Kwei-Tow crackup and everything else. Mama Fufu gave that impression.

"Jeffy—you do something for me, hey?" she said suddenly.

I looked up. "Sure. What?"

SHE nodded at the drink. "You knock dam' thing off bar. Quick. This make you feeling good. Then you eat supper."

"What?" I said.

"Go 'head. You do that. You feeling dam' better."

I stared at her, stared into her bright little eyes. I stared at her for I guess five full seconds, and then suddenly I stepped back, swung my hand sharply and knocked the little shot glass tumbling. I was as surprised as she was when I did it.

She was right. I did feel better. Darnedest thing I ever saw.

"You good kid," said Mama Fufu.

I grinned, shook my head slowly, then walked away from the bar and took one of the tables near the window. Mama Fufu turned her head toward the kitchen and called a strident order in Cantonese. I knew then that supper would be something special tonight.

The hot tea came in a moment and I sipped it appreciatively. It was weak by western standards, but I knew by its delicate flavor that it was made from special "Before Rain" leaves. There was a dish of paper-wrapped chicken slices, baked with juices and spices retained, and I munched on these as an appetizer.

I was well into the brandy-steamed lobster before the girl entered.

I was facing the door. I saw her come in and stopped my chopsticks in mid-air. Any more or less normal man not half-blind would have. But I might have recovered and continued the mouthward rise of my chopsticks if she hadn't paused—just slightly—as she saw me and looked at me with an unmistakable plea for help in her eyes. After that she moved quickly to a table.

I WATCHED her move. She had a glide, rather than a walk; her feet took long, flowing strides but her shoulders remained erect and still. She wore a modified Chinese gown of some material that shimmered in the light; it was tightly woven about her and there was very little guesswork as to the exact shape of her figure. To say that this figure was beautiful is not quite enough. It had a very special, flowing beauty—it had the lines of a panther, or a Siamese cat on a silken bedspread. Her skin was pale, yet rather translucent. Her face was somewhat triangular; the eyes in it were very large and like Mama Fufu's they had a suggestion of slant. In color they were vibrantly dark, a deep violet as much as anything. Her hair was of rich, singing black and in Chinese fashion drawn tightly from a center part to two little rolls on either side of her head.

The corner of my eye caught Mama Fufu at the bar. The old lady was staring at the girl in a blank, unfathomable way.

I finally put the suspended morsel in my mouth, and laid my chopsticks across the bowl. I saw that one of the waiters had appeared at the girl's table and I heard her order in excellent Cantonese. Her voice was well-modulated, but slightly husky. As she ordered she kept glancing over her shoulder out of the window, or darting her eyes in a worried way toward the door.

It was too much. I couldn't stand it any longer. As the waiter moved away I got up and walked boldly to her table.

"I'm Jeff Lawson," I said. "Anything I can do?"

Just like that.

She looked up at me in a startled way, although I was sure she'd noticed me approaching. In that same even, husky voice she said, "Thank you. I'm quite all right." She looked down and pretended to study the menu slate again.

I grabbed a chair and sat. "Look—I watched you when you came in. You need help, I'm sure of that. This is no time for formalities—"

Her eyes came up again. Very deep, very violet this time. "It's very kind of you Mr. Lawson. But—well—"

"But why should I help out strange damsels in distress?" I grinned a little. "I've got an ulterior motive. I'm thinking it might lead to dinner together some time. But let that go for the present. What can I do?"

She said quietly, "All right." She dropped her eyes. "I do need help. I need to be taken home."

"Sounds simple enough," I said.

She drew in her under lip for just an instant. "I hope it is simple—" Her eyes flickered toward the window again. "I will be frank with you. There may be some danger."

"Somebody after you? Threatening you?"

Her hand came out suddenly and rested on mine. Her long, tapered fingers looked cool, but they were actually warm to the touch. "Please," she said. "I appreciate your help, and I need it. But you must promise—no questions. I couldn't possibly answer them."

"All right." I shrugged again.

For the smile she returned I think I would have given up asking questions about anything. Her hand slid away and mine still felt warm where she had been touching it. I said, "What do I call you?"

"Lark Vallon is my name," she said.

"Oh." I started to nod—and then suddenly I stiffened. "Lark Vallon?"

"You know the name?" There was something half-puzzled, half-frightened in her eyes.

"Yes," I said evenly. I stared at her evenly, too. "I used to hear it often. On a radio in a B-25. Over three years ago—"

"Oh, that," she said. I had the impression that she shuddered inside. "You don't approve of the fact that I sang on the Jap radio, of course."

"I wouldn't give you a medal for it," I said. I shifted a little in my chair, undecided whether or not to leave. I recalled now that I'd seen Lark Vallon's name advertised as a feature attraction in the ball room of one of the large Canton hotels.

"Please don't go," she said. Her eyes widened a little. "I was cleared by a military court, you know. Singing on their programs wasn't my idea. But they had

ways of making you do things."

I said, "All right." But I wasn't as eager as I had been a moment ago. And I was watching her more closely. "You say you need to be taken home."

She nodded. "I don't think they'll attack if there's someone with me."

"They?"

She smiled faintly. "No questions—remember?"

I frowned, found cigarettes, offered her one which she refused, and then lighted my own. "Maybe I'm not being very bright about this," I said. "But then I'm getting used to not being bright." I nodded at the window. "I've got a Flying Devil Airlines jeep out there. It ought to get you home safely."

"I know," she said. She still had her faint smile. "I saw it outside. That was why I came in here."

"You figured on finding someone, eh?"

"I thought that an American pilot would be just crazy enough perhaps, to help me—"

"I'm not a pilot," I growled. Then I shrugged. "But I'll do what I can. Where do you live?"

"I'll direct you," she said. She gathered up a handbag that was made of the same shimmering stuff as her gown. She dropped a fistful of bills on the table and had apparently forgotten dinner, as I had. Just before we left I saw Mama Fufu standing behind the bar staring at us. She looked stiff, strained—as though held in an old-fashioned photographer's brace. It seemed to me that her little dark eyes were trying to tell me something, but I was dizzy with Lark Vallon's beauty and perfume.

IN THE street I replaced the rotor in the jeep—a safer method than ignition key—and we ground away from the worn curb to bounce through the cobbled street. This was the old city, below the Si-Kiang, where each street was named after a trade—Silk Street, Gold Street, Silver Street—and it was full of the life and smell and throb of China. Past the open shop fronts scores of people milled, and there was that ageless feeling that it had been the same five centuries ago,

would be the same five centuries hence. Peasant women in flopping winged hats and short trousers moved on their unnamed, unnumbered errands. Waist-naked, flat-muscle coolies carried incredible loads on bent heads and shoulders. Gowned merchants and professional men shuffled gravely past them. Walking vendors struck gongs, clapped sticks, shook rattles, or thumped drums—each according to his wares.

The jeep pushed slowly and its horn worked overtime.

"Turn right here," said Lark Vallon when we came to the end of the street.

"Right?" I looked at her. The right hand turn led deeper into the old city, toward the next creek of the delta. I had naturally supposed she lived in a European settlement. But she nodded, so I turned right.

We went through more crooked alleys; the crowd thinned, the shops became more scattered, the lights farther apart. Leaning houses loomed in the glare of the jeep lamps. The way became bumpier, a deep drainage gully appeared in the center of it.

Suddenly she had her hand on my arm. "Jeff Lawson," she said queerly, tautly—"Yes?"

She was whispering. "Please understand—I had to bring you this far. Make a pretense of going through with it. But I can't finish. Don't ask why—don't ask anything, please. Some day I may be able to explain—"

"What in blazes are you talking about?"

"Sh!" She put her finger to my lips. The touch of her still felt warm and electrifying. "It's a trap, Jeff. This is a blind alley. The only thing for you to do is to get out and run. Now—while you have time!"

I said, "What?" There was a rustling beside me and she stepped from the jeep. Before I could move she was melting into the shadows at the side of the alley. "Hey!" I said. I slid from the wheel and started to follow. I was actually dizzy with bewilderment. Then from the corner of my eye, I saw something move in the glaring lights. I whirled my head just in time to notice a figure—a bulky, limping

figure—slide back into the darkness.

"Lark!" I said. I blinked at the gloom. But she had disappeared—there were a dozen doorways, niches, alleyways for it.

Just ahead there was a pattering of feet—and another sound, a hard clomping on the pavement that could have been the step of an artificial leg. I started to turn. My hand dropped to the pocket of the powder blue tunic, although I knew very well I'd left the two Mausers with the Ghurka. I would have given anything in that moment for a weapon—any kind of weapon.

Out of the gloom that edged the headlight spray came four figures. I didn't see them well enough to decide whether they were short, tall, fat or thin. I whirled and started to run. My foot caught in a deep gulley, and I fell flat on my face. I tried to leap up again. Something slammed into my back, knocking the breath from me. I went down once more and hands clawed at my arms, trying to lock them behind. Other figures gathered around. Kicks and blows came out of the night—the first few were painful, but the rest were cushioned by a daze . . .

There were firecrackers on my eyelids. I thought I heard several shrill, piping whistles—the sort the Canton police use—but I was never really sure about that.

Things went into a deep, dark oblivion.

IV

THIS WAS PRIMORDIAL, THIS feeling of ooze and slime all about me. This was a memory that went back to some scaled, wiggling ancestor of mine. And I had deep inside me the near-pain of absolute fear—a festering bewilderment and insecurity.

I didn't remember all that had happened at first. I woke up, and one side of my face was buried in something cold and clammy. I lifted my head. Mud. Thick, greedy, black mud all around me. I was lying on the bank of a creek.

Somehow I got up. My head began to throb and aches began to filter into all my muscles and bones. I shook my head and stretched my body, but that only made the pain worse. "Now, let's see," I told

myself. "I'm Jeff Lawson and for some reason or other I shouldn't be here. Shouldn't be in this place. Can't figure why—but I shouldn't be here."

It went on like that for a couple of minutes, or maybe it was seconds, while I gradually recalled things and looked around me and saw the leaning wattled houses only a few score yards away, saw long morning shadows, and heard people stirring and calling. A sampan creaked as a boatman poled it from the shore.

I remembered the Ghurka—and a mission, suddenly. I looked at my wrist watch. It was broken. The hands beneath the cracked glass said nine. I rubbed my face with my fingertips. Blood had caked on my upper lip and around my eyebrows.

I staggered to my feet and the world did a rumba for a while.

I supposed I was somewhere in the old city, along one of the delta creeks, but where, which one, that was a mystery. I scrambled up the bank, and on to a dirt thoroughfare, and the effort exhausted me. The aches and pains became worse. My ribs and kidneys especially; they felt as though hot irons were strapped to them. A charcoal vendor came along, wobbling under his load and clanging his piece of iron to announce his wares. He stared at me and I raised my hand stupidly, and said, "Kai tim—choong-ah?" but he didn't understand.

I stumbled after him, wondering when I'd find a rickshaw, a bus, anything . . .

It was more than an hour before I reached the airport at Tonk-Tong. The Curtiss Seagull was already at the mooring dock along the creek, its engine idling. Not far from it stood Ghurka Purcell, his legs spread, his arms folded across his chest—and beside him Mike Giannini with a brand new bandage over his ear.

The Ghurka had his usual Chinese soldier's cap pushed far back on his forehead. His basalt eyes glittered. The seams in his face were deep-shadowed in the morning light. "Good morning, Jeff," he said in the soft casual tone that held all the rebuke of a General Court Martial. He lifted his wrist and glanced quizzically at his watch.

I stepped right up to him. "Ghurka,"

I said, "I don't know what time it is—and I don't care. I just spent the night on a mud bank. Whether they thought I was dead, or whether the police started to come around, I don't know. I don't care. I—"

"Where's the jeep, Jeff?" asked the Gurka.

It struck me for the first time that I'd lost a pretty expensive piece of equipment. I said, "I don't know. Let me finish my story first."

"Yes, by all means, finish your story," said the Gurka. I glanced at his eyes and saw that he wouldn't believe whatever I told him. He'd made up his mind that I'd been on a drunken bat, and it was going to be hard to convince him otherwise. I kept looking at his eyes and I felt as much as ever that some day I must throw my fists against that lined face and keep throwing them until it was raw, until former Colonel Elmer T. Purcell felt some of the pain that I had felt. What made it worse was the way he implied that he was doing me a favor by keeping me on the Flying Devil payroll. As I saw it, he owed me that, and much more. But at that moment I was weak and sick—hitting him, smashing him would have to wait.

Mike stepped forward. His eyebrows, each nearly as thick and black as his mustache, were twisted upward. He put a hand on my elbow. "What in the devil *did* happen to you, Jeff?"

"I'll tell you later," I growled. I didn't take my stare from the Gurka's eyes. "Right now I'm going to wash, patch up and have breakfast. If the Seagull hasn't left by then I'll go along. If I'm still working, that is—"

The Gurka didn't answer. He looked me up and down just once—then made an about-face and walked away with his peppery stride.

"Come on," Mike said. "Time for an aspirin."

THE Seagull was a good airplane—a pilot's ship. It hummed throatily at about two thousand as we finished our circling climb, then set off toward the scattered flecks of our island destination. I sat

in the rear cockpit, almost under the tail fin, and kept communications with Mike by interphone. Being used to the cleaner lines of a land plane, I was mildly surprised when she got off the water easily and climbed in a sharp bank. I gazed from the cockpit at the upturned wing tips, the port and starboard floats below them, and the sweeping curve of the main float under the fuselage. The inverted Ranger—powerful as 520 horses—snarled happily up ahead.

As usual I followed through on the controls, wondering if I might not be able to fly again if I tried it this time. After we had reached our altitude and set off on course, Mike's voice called in the earphones. "Take her a while if you want to, Jeff."

"Roger," I said it as calmly as my leaping heart, hollow stomach, and too-quick breath would allow. I latched on to the controls that had been modified into the rear cockpit.

I began to think about things, as one does when he flies. I thought about my attackers of the previous night. It seemed to me that there had been at least three or four of them, and that they had done a pretty thorough job. But I couldn't decide whether it was meant as a warning of some sort, or whether they had intended to kill me finally but had been interrupted. If it were a warning, I couldn't imagine why. For that matter, I didn't know why they would want to kill me, either. I felt that they must be in some way connected with the two men who had tried to capture the Catalina the day before; I was still sure I'd glimpsed Ivory-leg beyond the headlights before it all started. But the connectives were still missing . . .

I thought about Lark Vallon. She'd been the decoy for the whole thing, that was clear. Yet she'd apparently relented or something at the last moment. That didn't make sense, either. The thought of her made me boil with anger, and yet I wanted to see her again. There had been an air of unfinished business crackling about both our heads since the first few moments we'd met—I felt that.

Mike's voice interrupted my reverie. "Pirate Islands just ahead," he called.

"Okay," I grunted back. I banked hard—losing a few feet in an unintentional slip—and saw the scattered spots of the islands.

"Keep flying it," said Mike. "You're doing fine."

I circled down, knowing that my movements were jerky, my coordination clumsy. I swore at myself, as I might have sworn at a tin-head student. I leveled off at about two hundred feet, and then started on the first leg of a course we'd already planned; a series of parallel lines that would cover the islands thoroughly.

Each time I crossed an island, I would bank hard so that we could peer down at it. They were of varying sizes, none very far apart, none bigger than a few miles in any direction. Most were covered with green foliage and in some this thickened into miniature jungle. There were palm tops, and there were the ragged heads of cork oak poking through the palm in places. Most of these islands sloped into the sea, and there were few approaches for deep draft vessels. Some had tea plantations. We could see the workers in the fields look up and stare as we passed over them. Their round straw sun hats made an orange polka dot design in the green of the fields.

The Ghurka had briefed us carefully—our primary job was to locate any place that looked as though it might have been prepared for a seaplane base. He'd checked and found that none of the islands had wharf or dock facilities, and so any new structures along those lines were to be regarded as suspicious. If we found any likely sites, the Ghurka would then attempt to use natives to learn if they were indeed the nesting places of air pirates. By that time he hoped to have the bombs he was trying to get. There is much material gone astray in China; it would be not at all impossible to find aerial bombs somewhere.

SO WE began our reconnaissance. At first the act of banking at low altitude brought back a semblance of my trembling and inside fear. I kept thinking that all I had to do was move my fingers a fraction of an inch the wrong way, and I would

devastate another airplane, take another life. And then, after a while, the feeling began to pass. I saw that I was flying more easily—I was almost beginning to enjoy it. *Maybe there's a hope*, I was thinking. *Maybe this is where I start licking the thing*. But very deeply I sensed that the change had to come inside me somewhere first—that there was a key, a log that would break the jam, and that I hadn't put my finger on this yet.

We came to an island shaped something like a dagger. Its pommel was a rounded spur to the south, its point a sharp promontory on the north. Two little sand spars jutted from either side, making the hilt. Altogether it was about five miles long. It was covered mostly with jungle and I was about to pass over it and forget it, as I had the others, when Mike's voice barked into my ears.

"Jeff! Pull up! Make another pass—I think I saw something!"

I grabbed the phone. "What was it? What'd you see?"

"Don't know for sure. Looked like a junk sail in the trees. Want another look—"

The seaplane had already slammed past the hilt of the island, and was beyond it. I gave her throttle, stuck back and to the side, and she chandelled upward. At the top of the sudden climb I dropped off gently, and reversed direction. I was a little surprised and pleased at the smoothness of the maneuver, realized that I hadn't been thinking about myself when I'd done it, and then abruptly found my nervousness returning again.

We described a shallow bow across the western end of the island. We kept the wing down and looked hard. Presently I thought I caught flashes of a bluish reflection winding through the trees near the center of the island. It seemed as though a stream or an inlet might be concealed under the foliage. With my eyes I followed the probable course and noticed a slight indentation on the coast line, near the pointed cliff.

And then—for just the barest part of a second—I caught a glimpse of square, orange-brown shape that I knew must be the junk sail.

"There it is!" Mike was shouting.

"I see it," I said. "Same one picked our friends up I think. And there's a creek that makes a kind of camouflaged harbor there."

We passed the northern point of the island and made a wide circle. I throttled back and started to coast across it again. Just as the airplane came over the promontory I noticed bright flashes down among the trees, as though someone were signaling with a mirror. But they were scattered—about three altogether—and the one in the middle was much bigger and brighter than the others.

I learned quickly enough what the flashes were.

Inky black puffs began to appear in the sky around the airplane. The ship bucked. One black puff came out of nowhere; it appeared directly ahead and then seemed to slam past us as we came forward. I recognized the size and color of the explosions—twenty millimeter stuff. I knew it well. Too well. And now I could see that the smaller flashes were sending up bright, curving tracer lines—fiery lashes that tried to catch us with their tips.

"Jeff! For cripesakes, give it to me, Jeff!" It seemed that Mike was yelling into the interphone.

I realized that I had frozen to the stick. The old fear was back again and it was a big, smoldering blob right in the pit of my stomach. I scarcely heard Mike. I heard only the panic singing in my ears. I think I screamed—something mingled with the slip-stream roar and sounded like a scream, anyway. I pulled hard on the stick, gripping it until my knuckles were white. The ship's nose racked skyward; she groaned and grumbled and the wings and tail assembly started to buffet.

"Jeff! Give it to me! Jeff!" Mike was still shouting. I felt stick and rudder move as he tried to take it away. I couldn't let go. I clamped my teeth until they ached, but I couldn't let go.

THERE was a sudden blossoming of fire off the right wing, and a noise that sounded like a puddle of kerosene catching fire—*plomp!*—like that. The ship rattled as though gravel were being kicked,

into it.

"Jeff!" roared Mike.

I must have relaxed my grip, because the stick suddenly snatched itself from my hand. That broke my paralysis, too. I let go of it completely, and I slid my feet from the rudder pedals. At about that point the ship flopped over in a stall, and dropped sickeningly. I saw the green tree tops slam toward us. I closed my eyes and threw crossed arms in front of my face. By the sudden pressure in the seat, then, I knew that she was curving out of it. I opened my eyes and saw tree tops come past the wings—we were that low. The engine roared suddenly as Mike boosted the throttle, and then we roared away from the ground.

I put my hands over my face and kept them there with bitter shame. I couldn't stand myself. And I hated the Ghurka for starting it all, and I hated Mike for always being so sickeningly decent about it and I hated the whole world on general principles. It must have been a long time. After a while Mike's voice said, "Jeff—you okay?"

I mustered what steadiness I could and said, "I'm okay. How about you?" He said he was all right. I looked up; I looked out of the cockpit and we were over the sea, the coast was just ahead of us. "I think the oil line's hit," Mike said. "The pressure's dropping bad."

I confirmed that on my own gauge. She was down between fifteen and twenty and still going. Already, to a pilot's ear, the Ranger engine was beginning to make that slithering, metallic protest that means danger. I didn't have to ask Mike whether or not we'd make it back; I knew that it was a toss-up, and I knew that he'd be scanning the coast for an emergency landing spot—

"I think I can get her down," he said a moment later. "Unless you'd rather bail—"

I had a queer, instantaneous flash of that fog-bound night in a B-25 over Kwei-Tow. "I'll stick," I said tightly.

As we left the sea and came over the land she began to rattle. I tried to ignore it and concentrate on how to ride a crash, how to relax. But I couldn't forget how I'd

frozen on the controls long enough for us to be hit by the flak, and the taste of failure was harsh and dry.

The engine got worse with each second. Although Mike trimmed and jockeyed the ship with hairline skill, she kept losing altitude. We were at a bare five hundred feet when the winding creek and the Flying Devil hangar appeared off our wing.

At Mike's signal I got busy and radioed the ground for an emergency let-down. Below I saw people run from the hangar; I saw the red crash jeep scoot from behind it and race toward the dock. Several men began to shove the crash boat into the water.

Mike banked the Seagull very gently—coaxing her—on to final approach. He was making a power-on landing, of course, but the power he needed was gradually dropping; he had to keep adjusting for it. That same power might disappear completely at any instant—in which case he'd have to depend on the forward gliding speed to get us in.

I looked across the shoulder of the wing and saw the ribbon of the creek come toward us; I saw also the dents and jagged holes with little, triangular pieces of metal peeling away. I heard the engine grind and whine in protest.

Well, maybe this is the end, I thought. Maybe this is how Jeff Lawson, the lad who cut his teeth on a wing spar, the hot pilot, the airborne kid—maybe this is how he'll end up. Maybe it's better this way. Solve a lot of problems for everybody concerned.

The ship gave a sickening lurch. One float slammed into the water—and water at ninety miles an hour can be a brick wall. The main pontoon came down then with a terrible rolling, rumbling sound. Spray flew. The nose dipped, and I could hear the crankshaft burr when the propeller tip hit the water. The creek, the land around it, the hangar, the dock—everything swirled around crazily outside the cockpit. I was jerked forward and my forehead slammed into the instrument panel. It dazed me, but I was still conscious. There was more noise, more slamming and jolting, and we somersaulted. Water came into the cockpit. I racked my safety belt

away and pushed out—hard.

Moments later I had broken to the surface and I was trying to swim, with my shoes and trousers getting in the way. I saw the prow of the crash boat moving swiftly toward me—I turned my head and there was Mike's head bobbing a few feet away.

I treaded water, and waited for the worst part of it—facing the Ghurka again.

V

THERE WAS ONE THING I HAD to do before I left Canton—and I walked into Mama Fufu's as the first step toward doing it.

Yes, I was leaving. The Ghurka's soft holier-than-thou speeches had finally brought me to the boiling point, and I had told him in detail what he could do with his job. "You're making a great mistake, Jeff," he had simpered, then—and I'd almost socked him for it. Almost. Mike Giannini had been there, and he'd grabbed my elbows, and then the both of them had talked me out of it. I had stalked out of the place without even arranging for my check—I'd supposed they'd send it to my hotel.

It was the day after the Seagull flopped into the creek, then, that I barged into Mama Fufu's. I was still smoldering with all that had happened. What made me angriest was that the Curtiss seaplane wasn't at all hopelessly lost—they were already hauling it in before I left the hangar—and yet the Ghurka had shaken his head in that sad way of his and had murmured about how I oughtn't to have frozen on to the controls like that. Well, I was right back where I'd started, and I didn't care. It was better this way. I'd think of something to do, some way to turn after I left Canton—and after I took care of this one bit of unfinished business.

"Mama Fufu," I said, walking directly to the bar, "you know everybody in China. Where does Lark Vallon live?"

Her razored, V-shaped eyebrows went way up—and I thought then that she was merely surprised because I hadn't ordered a drink. Her tiny eyes glittered as she studied me. She folded her little bird claws in front of her on the bar. "You not

want to know this, Jeffy. Is only trouble for you."

I nodded. "Maybe. But maybe the kind of trouble I like."

Her eyes searched mine. I had an idea that Mama Fufu was well enough acquainted with what had happened in the old city, the night I'd fallen for Lark Vallon's trap. I had an idea she knew much of what might be behind it. "You cannot help Lark Vallon. You can only make trouble worse," she said.

I said, "Who wants to help anybody? I've got a bone to pick, that's all."

"But surely you know this Pung is dangerous, hey?"

"Pung? Who's he?"

Mama Fufu looked surprised. Her brows went up again and she tilted her head. "But you must know Pung. Montgomery Pung. Is only reason he tries to kill you. No?"

I shook my head. "Nothing you're saying makes sense."

"Montgomery Pung," she insisted. "He is supposed to be dead—but you know he is alive. This must be, Jeffy. Why else he trying to kill you?"

"Now, wait a minute. Let's back up and start over again." I pulled up a bar stool and straddled it. "What does this Pung friend of yours look like? And what's his connection with Lark Vallon?"

She looked at me curiously, as though suspecting me of kidding her, but finally she started to talk. "Montgomery Pung come from San Francisco long time ago. Before Japanese war. Pretty soon he is boss of every racket in Canton. Get very rich. Own estate, swimming pool, limousine, airplane and yacht. When Japs come is still okay for Monty. He is polite, tricky. He help them, and keep his rackets. He always say some day he be governor of Kwangtung Province. Maybe more. Maybe some day another Chiang Kai-Shek, hey? Dangerous man."

I grunted a little and said, "I'd like to have a rupee for every Chinese bandit who has political ambitions. There must be a million of them."

"But not like this Pung," said the old lady. "You see, the Japanese finally getting sore, and supposed to take him out

and shoot him. This what everybody think. But he bribes executioner—he disappear. Now he come back, but not ready yet for everybody to know he is alive."

"Hold everything!" I snapped my fingers. "What's his chop mark? Is well-known?"

"Oh, yes. Everybody know Pung's chop. Is picture of hawk moth—"

"Then Pung's the guy who tried to pirate the Catalina. I saw a tattoo on his wrist—I wasn't supposed to see that. That's why he tried to have me killed. So it wouldn't leak out that he was alive. Looks like he has bigger ideas than just piracy and kidnapping in wanting to hijack himself an airplane." I shrugged then and dug for cigarettes. "Lark Vallon's his girl friend, eh?"

"No—is not that. Not exactly that." Mama Fufu looked at once thoughtful and disturbed.

"Well, it doesn't make much difference. I still want to see her. Come on, Mama Fufu—where does she live?"

Those tiny, glittering eyes stared at me for another second. Then she turned swiftly, scooped rice paper brush and ink from the counter behind the bar and said, "I will show you."

THE PLACE Mama Fufu indicated was on Su-Tiao Creek, and I reached it by rickshaw. There was a rutted waterfront street, hemmed in by leaning warehouses on one side and prows of docked junks on the other. There were glowing paper lights, moving figures and unconcerned voices on some of the junks. One appeared to be the setting for a cocktail party—it had become quite fashionable for Europeans to live on these huge, docked vessels since the war.

We passed a mooring bawser and a rat scuttled from it. He paused to look at us with pinpoint lighted eyes, until the rickshaw boy shouted, laughingly, "*Chai lai!*" at him, and he disappeared. The creek water slurped against the pilings below.

I looked at Mama Fufu's roughly sketched map again and figured that my destination would be at the end of this street, some hundred yards away. I stopped

the rickshaw boy, paid him, and continued on foot, keeping in the shadows. As I passed an open space between two junks I glanced toward the creek. I stopped fully, then—and stared. A slender, low-winged monoplane with a pair of open cockpits, rested on two pontoons, moored to the stern of the junk that would be Lark Vallon's.

I moved to the edge of the dock, squinted, and examined it more closely. It wasn't a familiar type, although roughly it reminded me of a PT-19 trainer on floats. Something about the faired fuselage, and the cowl ring suggested Japanese manufacture. Probably one of the Nakajima SKT series.

As I squinted I didn't miss the outlines of twin guns hanging askew over the rear cockpit.

My gaze shifted to the girl's house junk. A small, lighted window crack glowed in the after portion. From the wharf, a rickety bamboo gangplank ran along the hull, slanting finally to the deck amidships. I frowned and decided to take a look before I announced myself.

The gangway swayed and creaked a little, but not loudly enough to be heard through the cabin bulkheads, I was sure. Just as I stepped to the deck another rat slithered somewhere and nearly scared my heart out of its rib cage. I made my way toward the light, and climbed a companion way to a higher deck. The junk was well-made—none of the stairs or boards creaked.

I heard voices as I came near the cabin. The light filtered through partly-drawn slat-blinds, a mosquito screen covered them. I moved quickly to that window, put my head to its edge, and listened.

Lark was there. I heard her unmistakable voice—those husky, almost muffled tones which made her songs so exciting—and dimly I saw her figure moving inside. It seemed to flow from one end of the room to the other. There was worry in her walk, and there was worry in the way she fumbled for her words. "But I might not even be able to get the job in the first place, Monty," she was saying.

I dipped my head further and saw her guest. It was the thin party—the one whose

tattoo I'd seen. But he had no dark glasses this time and I could see all of his narrow, sharp-cornered face. It had a certain handsomeness to it which was spoiled by the eyes—they were mere razor slits, so narrow that I couldn't imagine how he saw through them. His hair was long and black, thick over the ears, and carefully combed rearward to a point like a duck's stern. A smudge atop his upper lip showed that he was growing a mustache since I had last seen him.

HE SAT his chair languidly, right foreleg resting almost horizontally on his left knee, his elbow on this foreleg and his long fingers gracefully in mid-air to hold a cigarette in a jade holder. He no longer wore the dark, shabby suit he had aboard the Catalina. On the contrary—he was decked in a uniform of light grey, heavy with silver braid on the cuffs. One of his own design, I was willing to bet. A cap similar to our airline flop-tops rested on the table, and there was silver embossing on its bill. This was the resurrected Montgomery Pung . . .

"You'll get it," he said. His voice was high rasping, but his accent was perfectly good U.S.A. "When I figure on something it works out. Always. You know that, Lark."

She stopped pacing for a moment, looked at him and shrugged.

He laughed. Nastily. "It'll be a cinch. I've got all the papers worked out—they prove you were raised in a mission, you're a registered nurse. That old Hyena'll give his right hand to get you. He's had to use guys like this Lawson up until now"—

She came suddenly to the table's edge, across from him. She put her fingertips on it. "I don't like it, Monty. I've played along with you because—well, you know why. But you never pulled me in this far before."

He seemed amused. Only his eyebrows moved as he regarded her. "I don't have to remind you again about the old lady, do I? Those official Jap documents—all stamped and sealed?"

"You're completely rotten, aren't you, Monty?" she said, looking at him in a hard, even way.

"Me?" He laughed again. And then his face hardened abruptly. He leaned on his elbow. "They used to beat me up and call me that damned Chink when I was a kid in America. Then when I came here I was a coolie—dirt—worth less than a good goldfish in some stinking war lord's garden pond. Well, that's all changed now. Maybe you call it completely rotten, but there's no other way to buck it. Believe me—I know."

She shook her head. "You don't fool me, Monty. You're just blaming every rotten thing you've ever done on the world in general. That won't cure you. You'll keep on being sick inside no matter how far you go."

"Shut up!" said Monty Pung suddenly, slapping the table. His eyes remained slits but his jaws worked in and out and the hard muscle just below his ear bunched itself into a little knot.

Lark shrugged and moved away again.

All this time I'd been looking and listening curiously, feeling just a little guilty for eavesdropping. I hadn't bothered to think much about all that went on. But now little things started whirring and clicking in my mind, and my brows became heavier and pressed down on the bridge of my nose. My guess was that Lark Vallon was about to try to get a job as stewardess with the Ghurka's airline. For another attempt to capture a plane, I supposed. And she was doing it because Monty Pung held some kind of a threat over her—something to do with official Jap documents.

Right then all of this had nothing to do with me; I'd quit the airline, and the human race, too, as far as I was concerned. Yet the beginnings of something deep inside held me there at the window. I wasn't aware of this odd inner change yet—I just knew vaguely that it compelled me to stick around.

Monty Pung's next words put a lump of ice into my chest.

"Okay," he said, "it's settled. Now the next thing we do is get rid of that guy, Lawson."

Lark's response came slowly. "Get—rid of?"

"Sure. He saw that tattoo. He doesn't know what it means, but he can shoot his

mouth off. And I'm supposed to be dead, remember? I'm not coming alive until things are ripe."

"Monty, that's one thing you're not going to do." She moved toward the table again. "You're not going to kill Lawson. You lied to me last time—said if I'd get him to the alley you'd just punish him a little. If the police hadn't come when they did, you'd have killed him then—"

"Now, look, sweetheart," said Pung, shifting his legs, "I've got nothing personal against this poor dope. But what can I do? If he spills about that tattoo, sixty different guys from the secret police to the Canton tongs'll start looking for me. I'm not ready for that yet."

"If you kill Lawson," she said steadily, "I won't go through with the airline plan."

He studied her for a moment, as though trying to decide whether or not she really meant it. Apparently he arrived at the former conclusion. "Okay, Lark," he said suddenly. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll grab this Lawson and hang on to him until after we get the Catalina."

"And then?"

He shrugged. "Then I'll ship him out. Shanghai. Stateside. Out of my hair, anyway."

"Remember that," she said. "Remember that you said that. Because if you forget—documents or no documents—I'll go to the police."

"Simmer down, sweetheart," laughed Pung. His chair shuffled as he rose. "Everything's going to be all right. I'll fly out to the island soon as it gets light and set everything up."

IT WAS time for me to take my startled, whirling head elsewhere. I broke from the cabin wall, trotted across the deck and back to the companionway. A moment later I was on the dock again and making swift strides towards the nearest main thoroughfare. I had things to do.

In the first few quarter hours I spent trying to reach Ghurka Purcell by telephone I had a chance to do a lot of thinking. I sat in my hotel room and called the airport, then his home, then some of the likelier bars in the order of their likelihood. The Ghurka seemed to have been temporarily swallowed

up by the earth. Anyway, as I attempted to find him, the funny little stirrings that had started deep inside me there on the deck of the junk, began to form into something more definite. Lark Vallon's husky words kept sounding in my mind over and over again. "You're just blaming every rotten thing you've ever done on the world in general. That won't cure you . . ." It was queer, but she might have been talking to me, instead of Pung. Maybe if she had been, I wouldn't have listened, I don't know. But I was remembering back, along the strings of time, to all the things that had happened to me, and to the way I'd felt with each one. The crack-up at Kwei-Tow. I'd blamed the Ghurka for that because he'd sent me there—yet even before landing I'd reminded Mike that it couldn't possibly be the Ghurka's fault, that all he could do was check the weather reports that came in. And then the way I'd tried to fly again; the way I'd trembled all over and gone to pieces. I'd blamed the Ghurka for that, too. When I'd returned to the States things hadn't been easy—and I blamed the Ghurka, plus people in general. The same way in Shanghai—and finally here in Canton where every thing I put my hand to seemed to turn out wrong.

Up until now I'd blamed everybody but myself for all this.

I put the telephone down after the twelfth call and scowled at it. Be morning, probably, before I could locate Purcell. Chances were he'd slipped off into the hills by plane for a quiet night with one of his mandarin buddies. Yet I had to warn him—and then I had to help him against Pung. I had to do this because that would start to make things right again. That would be the first step toward my being able to fly once more—I knew this with a strong, unshakable instinct. I felt better already, just knowing that I knew it.

I finally took a rickshaw out to the air-base, hoping the Ghurka might check in there some time before morning.

It was quiet at the Flying Devil hangar, a lone light burned in the pilot's room and the Chinese supervisor sat there listening to the radio. He waved casually as I looked in, and I realized that he didn't know I'd quit my job, yet. I paced up and down in

front of the hangar a few times, smoking about half a cigarette.

The moon commanded the middle of the sky by now, and it was one of these starkly clear nights when the stars seem alive and yet very unreal. The village across the creek stood in cut-out silhouette, black against the dark blue of the horizon. One or two cassia trees reached upward with their angled, oriental limbs—frozen temple dancers waiting for the gongs and plucked strings to start. The creek water gurgled under the landing dock.

There was another silhouette down there. I began to frown thoughtfully as I stared at it. It was the Seagull that Mike and I had flown, parked at the dock and rocking just a little with the river swell. As my eyes spread the gloom apart I saw a rack and a mechanic's dolly near it, and knew that they must have been working on it all day. I frowned and thought some more. Presently I dropped the cigarette and stamped it out—then headed casually toward the airplane.

I made my inspection careful and thorough. There was a flashlight held by clamps in the pilot's cockpit and I used this to check all the struts and braces and controls. I looked at the single forward firing gun mounted on the right cowl; I checked the chutes and found them loaded. I noted that the fuel tanks were topped.

"I'll fly out to the island soon as it gets light—" Monty Pung had said.

And that provided a quick and simple way to settle everything—if only I could fly. If I could make myself. If the things inside me would permit me to—

I took a deep breath and climbed into the cockpit.

VI

THERE HAD BEEN A DAY WHEN cockpit drill, and the starting of the airplane were automatic things—part of the bones, like eating, sleeping, shaving. But this time ever little detail was new, an obstacle to be carefully crossed. That was because it mattered so much. It was akin to the half-frightened, half-exalted feeling a cadet experiences on his first check flight.

Like a brand new kiwi I muttered the

alphabetical memory check to myself. C-I-G-F-T-P-R, it went. C—controls free and easy. I—instruments and switches, check from left to right. G—gas, proper tank, fuel pressure, mixture control. F—flaps on the take-off setting. T—trim tabs set. P—propeller at increase rpm. R—run up. And then little things, like setting the throttle brake so that it wouldn't slip. Listening to the general purr of the engine, checking the magneto drop.

I let the air cooled Ranger turn over for a while and warm up.

So far, so good. I hadn't even trembled. I was beginning to feel that I'd get her into the air, at least. I made my checks all over again just to be on the safe side.

During all this the night supervisor appeared, stared into the cockpit in a puzzled way, and I grinned, nodded and waved to him as though what I was doing was the most natural thing in the world. He seemed to accept that. He waved back and moved off again.

The temperature was finally right. And the oil and fuel pressure. When I revved the engine up she took the throttle eagerly, as though she enjoyed it. I looked at the time—four-thirty a.m.—and then at the blackness in the east which would presently flush with light. I left the cockpit then and carefully cast off the mooring lines, jumping back on to the wing with the last one. I returned to the seat and muttered to the airplane, "Let's go."

She taxied without much trouble to the middle of the creek, although the glaring landing lights made everything beyond them seem too dark and I had to cut them several times to get my bearings. I swung her around finally and pointed her nose west. There was practically no wind, but a faint breeze came from this direction. I clipped the landing lights, and waited for my eyes to get used to the moonlight again. I looked around me to both sides, sizing up the edges of the creek, and judging my take-off run. It was too late to check the magneto drop again, since there were no brakes to hold the pontoon if the engine were gunned.

I sat straight in the seat, took the stick lightly in my fingertips, and then shoved the throttle forward.

The S.O. clung to the water for a moment, as seaplanes do. Then she began to beetle forward, lift a little, and the spray began to fly. She roared and pulled, gaining speed every second. I felt the faint lift when the float step-back came out of the water. I had kept the canopy open and the deafening snarl of the cylinders, mixed with the rush of churned air was music in my ears.

A moment later she quivered with flying speed and I stuck her gently into the air.

It wasn't until I'd climbed to a good two thousand feet that I realized I'd flown. I'd done it—and without so much as a twitch of my little finger! I laughed happily and almost hysterically and let the sound of it go floating back with the slip-stream.

Dawn came, bleaching the dark fabric of the sky in the east, by the time I arrived at the scattered islands off the coast. I could see them already, gloomy little blobs on the blue-grey expanse of sea. I had climbed to about eight-thousand now and found it cool in my summer-weight uniform. I watched it become lighter, and held to the sky in long, lazy circles. The remnants of the flat night clouds began to color, as though glowing with flame before disappearing. The air itself was smooth; it felt almost creamy on the controls.

I kept a careful watch to the northwest, and whistled a nameless tune. It was the first time I'd whistled in three or four years, I guess. It was the first time I'd felt solid and at ease inside.

There was a moving shape beyond and below, across my left wing. I noticed it because the sun made a sudden pink flash upon it; and a moment later I could recognize the outline of slightly elliptical wings and two pontoons, like oversized boots. This would be Pung, returning to his island. In his SKT, or whatever it was. He'd undoubtedly acquired the little Jap plane the same way the Ghurka had acquired ammunition for the Seagull—through channels, underground channels.

I tussled for a moment with a big temptation that had suddenly come upon me. It would be the easiest thing in the world right now to wing over, peel away, and come screaming down upon Montgomery

Pung like an avenging fury. Easy, and very quick. Yet I couldn't quite do that. It wasn't a sentimental regard for rah-rah sportsmanship, or anything like that—it was, in a way, stiff self-pride. I wanted to put Monty into the sea, but I wanted to do it in a fair, even way. I wanted to be able to think to myself afterward that that was the way I had done it.

I turned slowly toward the approaching Nakajima, back-throttled and glided toward it.

HE SAW me when I was about half way. I knew he saw me, because he dipped sharply on one wing suddenly and tried to bank away. He didn't know that it was me—he didn't know that I was armed. But a guilty conscience is a guilty conscience, I guess. He reversed direction and headed for the deck . . .

I jammed throttle to the Seagull. She leaped forward nicely with a sudden roar, shoving the back of the seat into me and taking me along. I knew that Monty would see that sudden spurt and that he would begin to get the general idea. That was all I wanted—for him to have enough warning to fight back.

The distance between the two ships closed rapidly and it began to occur to me that Monty Pung must have clipped his own throttle, because ordinarily the Nakajima could outrun, or at least match the speed of the S.O.C. Both of their top performances should be somewhere around two hundred miles an hour. I glanced at my own indicated air speed and saw the needle quiver around two-ten, but then I was in a dive. Pung was levelling off, hoping to hug the sea and keep me from attacking below, I suppose.

And then Mr. Montgomery Pung surprised me—exactly as he had that morning in the Catalina when he'd matched my elementary judo with something better.

The Nakajima dipped momentarily in a short dive. After that her nose swept up past the horizon and she began to climb almost vertically. A moment earlier I would have been able to curve out of my dive and be in position to rake her with fire from nose to tail. But Monty had calculated nicely. I clipped the throttle and backsticked,

but knew that by the time I pulled out I would already be below the other seaplane. I held the control in my lap and felt the Seagull mush along, nose up, straining for lift.

I flashed past the Nakajima. I saw it overhead, still climbing, and then suddenly it was behind me. I added a slight left turn to my attempted pull-out, hoping I wouldn't force a stall.

Memories came. This was the way it was in air combat, I began to remember, these were the peculiar things about it, the sensations you never ceased to wonder at. There was the business of being together in one instant with your enemy, and then suddenly miles apart, quite magically. There was the way you forgot your controls, forgot deliberately planned maneuvers or acrobatics, and simply kept your eye on your opponent and flew to get on his tail. There was that impersonal feeling. You were fighting another airplane; there was no man in it, no flesh and blood human, it was just a machine, a flashing target that had to be taken out of the sky. You weren't scared, either, in these early stages of the fight. You had complete confidence after the first few battles. It could happen to the other guys, but not to you. You were either too good or too lucky. Sometimes both.

Or if you began at all to wonder what it would really be like to go down a flamer you choked the thought quickly, and laughed a harsh laugh, and fastened your eye on your opponent again.

I did all this exactly as I had done it the very first time. But I felt an added confidence. I could fly again—not just move the stick this way and that, as the book said, but really make the airplane a part of me. Really fly . . .

All this might have been very nice, too, if Montgomery Pung's seaplane hadn't suddenly fastened itself on to my tail.

I jerked my head around to spot it. I had passed under him, finally leveled off, and then skidded to the left. Meanwhile he had flopped over in a loop. And as he dropped from the loop he came into my wake, moving very fast. I frowned and swore at myself for being too eager and passing him like that. It was the sort of

thing a first mission rookie might have done.

I slapped my wing back to horizontal, cut the throttle and nosed up suddenly. There was no rear-view mirror and I lifted my chin to look back. The Nakajima's stubby cowl was so close that I imagined I could see the separate cylinders under the ring. I heard the sound of gunfire—by some freak it sounded as though it below, but I knew that wasn't the case when I saw holes dance across my wing toward the fuselage. The Seagull shuddered, touched hands with a stall, and then I whipped her off to one side and down. As I fell away I caught a flash of the Nakajima's two pontoons. She was tight, beautifully tight, in her maneuvers and had managed to break away before she overshot me.

My stall whipped me around in the opposite direction. Now I used throttle again and began a hard right bank toward where I'd last seen the Nakajima.

In the queer kaleidoscope of air combat we were suddenly facing each other—head on. There was the silhouetted face of the float fighter, a paper cut-out pasted on my windshield but growing larger with incredible swiftness. I started to tell myself that this would be a cinch, that I could out-nerve Montgomery Pung any day, but before my resolution could develop I was aware of the old, gnawing, overwhelming fear in the pit of my stomach.

"No!" I told myself sharply. I shook my head. I blinked my eyes. The silhouette of the Nakajima was still coming at me. And the fear had grown, it was clawing at me now. No! This was unfair, this wasn't right. This was no time for the old fear to return when once I'd licked it. Not now, when so much depended on me flying, and flying well—

I COULDN'T do a thing. My knees had started trembling and my hand was frozen to the stick. I just held it there, level, stared ahead with horror-wide eyes, and waited. The trigger was on the stick, a bare sixteenth of an inch above my finger. All I had to do was lift that finger

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. . . press that trigger . . . but I couldn't.

Flame dots, like the fires of candles sputtering in the wind appeared along the leading edges of the Nakajima's wing. I heard the hard rattling of slugs hitting my own airplane. The silhouette grew big and fat until it filled the windshield, and then it was suddenly an overwhelming blur. I yelled, and threw crossed arms in front of my face. Nothing happened. I pried my eyelids apart with all the will-power one might need to walk up to a lion and open his jaws. There was clear sky ahead of me, and the Seagull was still roaring along on an even keel.

I looked behind me. At first I couldn't find Pung's airplane, and then I saw movement and a speck; I made it out far beyond my tail and already banking swiftly for a return pass. I supposed then that my paralyzing fear had kept the Seagull headed for him as if to ram him, and that that had spoiled his nerve, shaken his aim.

You see, something told me, the others have fears, too. No different than your own.

I nodded, as though responding to some one in the cockpit. I pulled up into another near stall, dropped off on one wing again. The sideslip whipped me around to face

Pung a second time. But Pung was having no more of these head-on nerve duels. He was circling wide to come around on my tail.

The cold sweat was still on my forehead, but the worst of the fear was gone from my chest and stomach. My hand was steady on the controls again. Yet I wasn't entirely sure of myself. I knew that I wasn't yet completely free of the thing that had plagued me since the crack-up at Kwei-Tow. Bits of it, shreds of it, might come back at any time—as they had done a moment ago. There was still something missing, some little thing that had to be done before I could say that I flew again.

I stood on one wing and matched Pung's wide circle. One of us would get on the inside, now, and have the advantage. One of us.

It was getting lighter now. The sun was smaller and yellower and hung above the refraction haze at the horizon. It was beginning to have warmth on the skin and on airplane metal when I turned into it. Later, perhaps, the curious unpredictable cloud formations of the South China Sea would form, but right now it seemed as if the whole world was still air, peaceful air. I couldn't want a better day to die. But I wasn't going to die; I was going to live now. I had the key. That thought rolled through my brain over and over . . .

Pung's Nakajima had broad, tapering wings and a fuselage light as an eggshell. That meant that it could stand on a wing-tip and turn as though wrapping bunting around a maypole. The Seagull I flew was a nice, clean airplane with a remarkable performance for its big floats and unorthodox lines—but it was a box-car compared to the other. I had her in a vertical bank, and the stick in my lap. I had the throttle at about fifty-percent above stalling speed, which gave me plenty of margin for error and not too much momentum for the time I should come out of my turn. Higher speed wouldn't have helped much, it would only have widened the turn and the time consumed would have been exactly the same.

But the Nakajima was getting inside—fast.

My terror and paralysis didn't return this time. On the contrary I was so cool that I almost shivered with it. My face, my shoulders, my whole body, all were relaxed as though I slept. I gazed out of the cockpit and partly overhead and watched the fighter with the two pontoons move inexorably along the arc of the circle we both traveled, overtaking me.

I sized up the curving distance between us and considered trying a stall and quick, slipping reversal. But I felt that Pung would spray the length of my fuselage as it hung in the stall if I did that. There seemed only one other escape. It was dangerous and it wouldn't shake him from my tail, but it might surprise him enough to open the distance between us somewhat.

I peeled off quickly and roared seaward in a dive.

I SAW that the islands were beyond my cowling, coming up at me as though it were all a model on a platform and a giant jack lifted it. The peculiar dagger-shaped island was just off to the left. I shoved the throttle hard. The airplane trembled and the air speed needle began to quiver toward the red danger line. The howling of wind, engine and propeller made my ears ache. I whipped my head about and saw that Pung was indeed following, but was just beginning his dive. I had surprised him enough to gain a precious few seconds, and a precious few hundred yards.

And then the incredibly lucky thing happened—lucky for Pung, not for me. He curved into the wake of my dive and began to follow, about eight hundred or a thousand yards behind. I felt that in a dive my heavier, sturdier ship would gain on his match-box job and I was waiting for that to become apparent. As soon as I saw that I had gained I would level off and try to squirm away.

But at that moment there was a soft hammering out of nowhere on the skin of the airplane. It lasted for an instant and as I listened to it in surprise bits of glass and metal suddenly exploded from the instrument board before my face. I ducked instinctively. There was a noisier sound, like pebbles on tin, that seemed to come

from behind.

Without thinking I tried to fishtail and make an evasive target of myself. I worked the stick and rudder lightly several times. On the third try the cold, terrible realization came to me—the controls weren't working right!

While I fought both the airplane and the fear inside me I swore with frustrated anger. Pung couldn't have hoped to score at that range. He must have tripped his guns for a test burst. And blasphemy ran through me. If there were mysterious powers behind all this—the gods of men who fly—they certainly weren't giving me much cooperation.

The elevators still worked. I pulled the stick backward and groaned out of the dive with the seat pressing into me. An island whooshed past my wings, not two hundred feet below. The Seagull's nose grabbed for the sky-dome, seemed for a moment to have a finger hold, and then began to wobble.

Tac tac tac tac! I heard it across the wings and down the fuselage. I knew that Pung had closed the gap between us. He was having a turkey shoot. I opened my mouth and sent out a meaningless yell. The Seagull dropped off then; the belt slammed me, then the seat; the horizon started to wheel dizzily around my head. Hoping desperately that the controls would somehow work again, I fought the spin with stick and rudder. The spin became shallower. It seemed that something was taking hold. Yes—she was coming out of it. The horizon was sliding down past my nose again and no longer turning . . .

There was suddenly the ancestor of all roaring, crashing noises engulfing my ears. White spray made a choking curtain on all sides. Brightly colored flashes danced across it.

The white spray turned abruptly into black nothingness.

VII

THERE WAS A TIME WHICH wasn't clear, and the space around it wasn't clear, either. For part of it I seemed to hover near wakefulness, for the rest I knew I slept. Several times I had

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the impression of being moved; once I thought I detected the cloying, new hay smell of opium.

I woke up and looked into the thin, wrinkled and very alive little face of Mama Fufu.

"How long?" I said. That was the first thing I said. I wasn't really fully awake yet.

Her bird-claw finger crossed her lips. She spoke in a whisper. "There is not much time, Jeffy. I bribed the guard—but this they are soon finding out."

"Guard? What guard?" I rocked to a sitting position and little men began to swing sledges against the inside of my skull. There was a dry, sickening sweet taste and a kind of burning in my throat—someone had been keeping me unconscious by forcing me to smoke opium, I guessed. I saw that I was in a small hut of lashed bamboo; I could feel the night wind coming through the cracks. There was a cool, moist dirt floor under me. I felt my face—there was a good quarter-inch of beard on it.

Then I noticed that Mama Fufu was dressed in the floppy shirt and pajama legs of a peasant woman. A winged hat of blue cloth covered much of her head. She was squatting beside me; she fumbled and then found her cigarettes. I took one gratefully.

"It's screwy," I said. I was still feeling light-headed and unreal. "Everything's screwy." I lifted my head, sniffed, and said, "I smell the ocean."

Mama Fufu nodded. "You get awake, Jeffy. I tell you everything." Then she began talking swiftly, outlining what had happened. Even as her whispered story sank into my fuddled brain I didn't grasp it fully. I just kept nodding in a dumb way as she spoke.

Mama Fufu had felt I'd walk into trouble when I went to call on Lark Vallon in the junk. She'd followed. After that she'd sent one of her innumerable honorary Chinese cousins to tail me to the airport—and he had seen me take off in the Seagull. She'd guessed where I was going. She'd waited then, all the next day, and when I didn't seem to return she had begun making inquiries. Seemed she had

honorary Chinese cousins all over the place. At any rate it hadn't taken her long to find out that a seaplane had been shot down over the pirate islands, and that the foreign devil pilot had been pulled alive from the wreckage . . .

"Then I'm on Pung's island." She nodded. I shook my head, still trying to put it all together. "But how did you get here? And why?"

More honorary cousins. One had a sampan with a sail. It had brought her to the island this night; she'd made inquiries of workers in the tea fields and had been directed to the hut where I was confined. After that it was a matter of bribing the guard—something Mama Fufu with her deep knowledge of the Chinese found not too difficult.

"But why, Mama Fufu? I mean—I'm grateful and everything, but why?"

Her eyes glittered. "Because you must help. You must help Lark. You must get her free from Pung. She is now work for the airline, but this is so Pung can steal airplane. You must get back and help."

"Lark? Lark Vallon?" I brought my head up. "What's she got to do with you?"

"Lark is my daughter," said Mama Fufu.

"What?"

"Sh!" She brought her finger to her lips again. "I telling you everything later. Now—you come."

There was the business of getting to my feet, and staying there. It wasn't easy. Mama Fufu stood by patiently, and let me work it out for myself. And all this time I was still trying to put all the facts together and then imagine what happened from here on in. Just before we pushed outside Mama Fufu told me that the sampan and the boatmen were waiting along the shore, and that we had to walk about a mile to get there.

Outside I paused for a moment and blinked. My prison hut stood with several scattered duplicates in a thick grove of trees. Palm and cassia leaves rustled gently overhead and stars blinked through them. A half-naked Chinese with an Enfield rifle and a belt of cartridges stood to one side regarding both of us very calmly; Mama Fufu walked to him and put

something in his hand and chattered softly with him in one of the Cantonese dialects. He was apparently quite ashamed at having been bribed. Together, he and Mama Fufu closed the prison door and carefully bolted it. The guard, of course, would feign absolute surprise when it was discovered empty . . .

AND then suddenly we were moving off through the trees, the damp earth silencing our footsteps. Mama Fufu led the way, hopping along with an almost comical stride, and beckoning to me at each turn. From somewhere came the hum of a power generator, and several times I heard distant voices calling. We crossed a ridge of high ground that was relatively clear of trees, and I saw some of the rest of the island. To our right was the sharp, triangular cliff that made the point of the dagger. Ahead of us an occasional glint betrayed an inlet that ran through the thick foliage.

We went downslope for a few minutes, pushing through the trees again. I heard the sloshing of water ahead, and knew we must be near the inlet. Mama Fufu turned sharply to the right.

After what seemed endless moving through the trees and the flickering spots of moonlight that came from above we stepped suddenly on to a strip of shore. The water stretched out before us, and long, low swells lapped rhythmically on the sand.

But Mama Fufu was suddenly still—tense. I looked at her and saw her eyes darting about, looking for something. "What is it?" I said. Silently, she moved forward until her slippered toes came nearly to water's edge. She pointed to the shallow rut in the sand, and to the foot-steps around it. "The boat is gone," she said quietly. "My honorary cousin maybe was frightened, hey?"

"Oh," I said. I stared at the marks in the sand. "Oh." I turned to her. "Now what do we do?"

She shrugged her thin shoulders. "Wait. Until it is morning."

"But not here," I muttered, looking around. To my right the pointed cliff loomed like a castle against the sky. Boul-



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ders were strewn on the beach below it. I pointed to them and said, "Over there. Out of sight. Let's go."

We found ourselves presently in a nest of huge rocks that formed a natural hiding place. I lay there on the cool sand, panting a little, and watching the light spread itself over the sky. We could still hear the sea beyond the boulders as it made a rhythmic brushing on the shore. We'd already decided to go foraging for a boat of some kind, any kind, as soon as the sun rose.

Mama Fufu lay quietly with her tiny back against a rock, her knees drawn up tightly and her scrawny arms clasping them. Her wrinkled face was calm, and her little eyes were not moving much, but they were still very shiny and alive.

I stared at her in a mixture of admiration and bewilderment. "Lark is your daughter, then," I said finally.

She nodded. Her smile was very faint, and very sad. "Her father was French official in Harbin. I am myself, White Russian. We have been long in China—"

"I gathered that. But what I don't understand is—"

She put up her hand. "Why we separate? Why she is with Pung? I tell you the story. Then you seeing how you must help."

"I'm listening," I said.

She talked swiftly and easily. It was up to me to imagine the drama and suffering that belonged on the bare framework of her tale. Mama Fufu—before the Japs created the incident of Marco Polo bridge—had been the beauteous Madame Etienne Vallon, the toast of Harbin. Then the Japs marched. She and Lark, disguised as peasants, had stood in the crowd that watched them execute Monsieur Vallon—put a pistol to the back of his neck. After that there had been a year of flight; always moving, always in new disguise, always trembling at the sight of a new face, a knock on the door. They started anew in Canton. They separated to keep the Japs from tracing one through the other. And then, as the months went by, the Japs appeared to forget them. They had a war on their hands, by then, a tough war. Lark worked as a singer in swank hotels; the

old lady became cashier and barmaid in the bistro that now belonged to her.

There were guerrilla movements beginning in China then, against the invader. Mama Fufu joined one of these. This was how she met Montgomery Pung, who, by playing along with the Japanese was able to continue his rackets very successfully. Nobody among the guerillas was really sure of Pung—he had a way of playing both sides against the middle. But he was helpful. For one thing, he managed to keep amorous Japanese Colonels away from Lark. He made her too useful as a singer on their propaganda programs to be molested.

One day there had been a swift and terrible raid on a guerilla meeting—a group that had planned to bomb the radio station. Forty were tortured and shot. The betrayer was never discovered—

"I was the one," said Mama Fufu without blinking. "I did it. Maybe I would do it again—I do not know. You see they planned to throw the bomb while Lark was singing."

I stared at her. I couldn't think of a thing to say.

"There are records," she sighed. "And my name is on them. Pung was close with the Japanese, and he got himself these papers. If he brings these to a certain place I will be killed immediately, of course."

"And that," I said, "is how Pung keeps Lark on the string. By threatening to show those papers."

SHE NODDED. She shrugged, leaned back against the rock and closed her eyes.

I frowned at the sand and tried to put all of it together in my mind. An early splash of sunlight came through a crack in the rocks. As I sat there I began to hear the humming of an airplane in the distance—

I rose and lifted my head over the level of the boulder. I stared, and at first I couldn't see anything, but then after a while the faint outline of a ship became visible in the northeast. A moment later I could recognize the high wing and two engines of a Catalina. This would be the

Manila trip. I wondered if we were too late, and Lark was already aboard. And Pung—in some new disguise.

I started to turn away again to say something to Mama Fufu. But the sudden, erratic movements of the airplane brought my gaze back. Its wings rocked and it started to spiral. It fell off to the left, righted itself, then pulled its nose up and almost stalled.

"Something's happening up there!" I said.

In a moment Mama Fufu was beside me, staring too.

The airplane suddenly stopped its gyrating. It began a slow, controlled descent toward the island.

"Looks like Lark managed to do the job," I said quietly. I didn't bother to mention it, but I was thinking that this was piracy, and that Lark Vallon could be hanged if she were caught. And I was puzzled and just a little angry to find, all of a sudden that it mattered. To me, anyway, it mattered very much.

I left Mama Fufu in the boulders and made my way along the base of the cliff toward the mouth of the inlet. There was forming in my mind a plan which might—or might not—work. But it was the best I could think of.

The Catalina landed about the time I got to the inlet. I watched that landing with the usual critical pilot's eye; it was rough, but satisfactory. A few hundred feet up the inlet I could hear shouting—Pung's men I supposed—and I kept to the concealment of the trees. I saw that natural overgrowth had given the inlet a leafy roof, and that hacking and clearing had widened it in places to allow clearance for an airplane's wings. Then I spotted Pung's float plane—moored in a small basin near the mouth of the inlet. Its engine was covered and lashed with a small canvas tarpaulin. The Catalina came nearer; her engines spoke alternately as she was gunned and jockeyed to the inlet's entrance. I peered again through the trees, and a brownish, patched sail suddenly appeared around the corner of the island, moving in to follow the airplane.

While the flying boat maneuvered, I found a tree tall enough for lookout, and

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thick enough for concealment. It was a cork oak, gnarled, twisted and tangled. Moments later I was in its higher branches hooking a leg to my perch. The Catalina passed by below—I could have jumped to its wing as it did—then moved on toward the bamboo dock up the inlet. Here, where the passageway widened, it swung around in a complete circle until it faced the opposite direction, and then it came to rest at the dock, with its wing extending over the land. Men—most of them half-naked like the guard Mama Fufu had bribed—ran to make mooring lines fast. The right hand blister hatch opened and the passengers began to come out. As each one merged, one of Pung's pirates would step forward and fasten his hands behind him with a length of rope. One European in a white linen suit started loud objections, and he was knocked on the side of the head with a rifle stock.

The pilots emerged near the end of the procession. That was when I stared, and nearly lost my grip on the branch. The peppery stride, the painfully square shoulders, and the cocked Chinese soldier's cap were unmistakable—one of the pilots was the Gurka himself. The other—and I started again—was stocky, dark and had a black mustache. Mike Giannini. I frowned, and thought hard. It must have been that the Gurka suspected something on this trip, and decided to go himself. Apparently his alertness hadn't helped, however. I watched the ragged natives herd Mike and the Gurka into a line with the others.

PUNG finally appeared. He was garbed rather differently than the last time he had ridden a Flying Devil Catalina. He wore an immaculate white suit, a pith helmet and no dark glasses. His mustache helped the change of appearance. Lark Vallon, in a stewardess's tailored coat and skirt was the last to come out. I could notice her usual gliding walk, but I couldn't see the expression on her face. It seemed to me that she paused for just a moment to look at Mike and the Gurka before she followed Pung up the trail.

And then the captives were led roughly from the dock toward the interior of the

island. Two guards, both with cartridge belts and rifles, yawned and sat down by themselves under the wing of the plane.

I started to climb down from the tree again, as carefully and as quietly as I could.

I found Mama Fufu waiting anxiously back at the boulders and I outlined my plan to her swiftly. She didn't even hesitate when she heard it. She grasped it immediately, nodded, and said, "Come."

The first part of the plan was relatively easy. We made our way silently to the shore of the inlet, dropped into the water and swam across. Then we continued up the other side until we came opposite the moored Catalina. The guards were still on the other side of it; we had glimpsed them and they looked bored and sleepy. We entered the water again. We swam to the port side of the flying boat, clambered aboard carefully and silently, and then entered by the port blister.

The steward's compartment was a blessing. It concealed us, gave us a chance to dry, and offered food and cigarettes from its cupboard. During the day we could hear the guards stirring outside and talking occasionally—once they came aboard and held us in fright and suspense for a few minutes. But they were apparently merely curious about something or other in the airplane. They moved to the pilot's compartment, stayed there a while, then came back and returned to the dock.

I had planned to wait until night fall, because I would need the concealment of darkness, but toward the middle of the day the wind began to blow, the palm tops lashed at each other softly, and the Catalina began to rock as the inlet broke into ripples. I crept to the port blister and stared up into the sky. Grey and purple clouds were gathering. For once I was grateful for the suddenness of tropic storms—this was an unexpected break, and, I reflected, it was about time for one.

Hard little rain drops began to kick at the surface of the water. They drummed metallically on the fuselage around us. Gusts made sudden strikes at the foliage here and there. Outside it became darker; everything took on a gloomy, yellow-grey

tinge.

"I think it's time now," I said quietly to Mama Fufu.

She searched my eyes for just a moment, then she nodded abruptly. She took my hand and pressed it. "Good luck, Jeffy." That was all she said.

I crept forward to the pilot's compartment and took the pyrotechnic signal pistol from its metal clamps. I checked the load, then started back. I took a deep breath as I moved toward the starboard blister—I would have to work fast, and there wouldn't be any margin for mistakes.

The guards outside had donned shaggy bark raincoats and were huddled together under the wing. They might have crept inside the airplane, but they hadn't—that could be either the result of orders or plain Chinese perversity. At any rate, their backs were turned and they didn't see me as I carefully raised the hatch, felt the wind and rain sting at my face, and then stepped outside to the makeshift gangplank.

The sounds of the storm concealed the noise of my footsteps. I got to within ten feet of them before I raised the signal pistol and shouted: "Fai-ti! Sioo soom!" The words meant about the same thing as the English "reach for the sky pardner"—and I don't know whether they understood my Cantonese, for I never could get the tones straight, but they understood the look of the pistol in my hand. Even if they were aware that it was only a pyrotechnic signal job, they would know that the ball of fire it expelled could do terrible damage at close quarters.

Both of them stood up quickly and put their hands on their heads. One was smooth-skinned and Buddha-like, the other wiry and hatchet-faced. Over my shoulder I called to Mama Fufu: "All right—come on!"

The smooth-skinned pirate started to chatter something and I growled "Shut up!" and brandished the pistol. He opened his eyes wide, and clamped his mouth shut.

Mama Fufu bustled past me and scooped up their weapons. They looked to me, at a momentary inspection, like Japanese army rifles, similar in shape to the Springfield, but lighter. I took one. Mama



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Fufu held the other leveled at our two new prisoners. Her eyes glittered and she said, "I kill them now, Jeffy. Save trouble."

"No—you can't just—well, you can't do that." I stepped to interfere—

The piece barked. The Bhudda-like guard grabbed his stomach and looked very surprised. My jaw dropped in horror. Mama Fufu calmly worked the bolt and shot the other man, point blank in the face.

"No!" I said hollowly, shaking my head and feeling sick.

Mama Fufu shrugged, and then turned back toward the airplane. I watched her re-enter the blister hatch, feeling at once horrified at what she had done, and relieved that she had solved the problem of the guards so efficiently. I was glad it hadn't been my doing. I shook myself—shuddered—then turned toward the trail that led toward the interior of the island.

VIII

I WAS PADDING UP THE TRAIL toward the sound of the humming generator. It came intermittently between the howls of wind, the harsh rustling of the trees, and the floodlike swatches of rain. It was already muddy underfoot, and where there was no mud there were deep puddles and swift rivulets. Occasionally I would pass by an open space in the wall of trees and the wind would tear through it and attempt to knock me from my feet. This was a tropic storm—furious, completely evil and primitive, mad and wild. And it might be gone as quickly as it had come. I had to work fast.

I crossed the ridge and came to the huts abruptly. There was still a lone guard—one different than the man Mama Fufu had bribed—and he too wore a rough bark raincoat. He was huddled against the trunk of a tree, staring at the ground—being fatalistic about the storm, I supposed. I glanced at the scattered huts and wondered if my absence had been discovered yet. There was about an even chance that it had. In which case search parties would probably be combing the island already—perhaps Pung himself would be with them. He had kept me

prisoner, I imagined, because of Lark—she had already threatened not to do her part in the capture of the Catalina if I were harmed. But that he'd meant to get rid of me at first opportunity I had no doubt. Meanwhile, there was a strong possibility that some of his other captives were in these same prison huts. I turned to look at them and wonder which one.

It was probably the devil himself who made the guard look up at that particular moment.

I had been overconfident, of course—or perhaps too anxious. I had neglected to be absolutely concealed by the trees where I stood. Alarmed, when I saw the guard move his head, I tried to draw back—and that movement of my own caught his eye. He reacted quickly enough. He shouldered his piece and with barely enough time for aiming, fired. A thunderclap danced down from the heavens on the heels of the shot. Bits of bark flew from a tree trunk several feet to one side of me. I brought the rifle I held to bear. The guard had started trotting toward me and I covered the lower half of his figure with the front sight. I squeezed the trigger. The rifle exploded, kicked my shoulder, and then the thin grey smoke blew away from its muzzle and I saw the guard take three more steps before he fell quite undramatically to his face. He didn't move any more.

I listened at the doors of several huts before I heard voices inside one of them. My knees were shaking by that time, and I swore at them mentally, telling them to stop. I unfastened the thick bamboo log that latched the door, working with clumsy fingers.

Abruptly I was inside. Ghurka Purcell and Mike Giannini were staring up at me from the floor.

"Don't talk!" I whispered quickly. I stepped forward shutting the door behind me.

They were bound, hand and foot; their shoulders rested against the far wall. There was a large bruise straddling some of the seams on the Ghurka's cheek. Mike's usually well-groomed mustache looked ruffled; his chin was smudged. I leaned swiftly and started to fumble with the

hemp that held the Ghurka's wrists behind his back. His hands were already blue from lack of circulation.

"You're the last person in the world I expected to see," said the Ghurka softly. He stared at me.

"I'm surprised I got here myself," I whispered back. As I clawed at the knotted rope, loosened it, I told them how I'd come to the island. I told them about Mama Fufu, and about Lark.

"That girl tried to warn us," Ghurka nodded, "but it was too late. This Pung's got something on her, I take it—"

I told them about that, too. The Ghurka sat there when he was freed, and tried to rub his wrists. He couldn't move his fingers yet. I turned to Mike. Mike swore and shook his hands when I loosened them, and then he stood, swaying for a while, on his numb legs. Both were grimacing with the pain of returning circulation.

"The Catalina," I said, "is down at the dock, ready to go. It'll be tough—but we have a chance to make it. The idea is to get going as quickly and quietly as possible."

Mike nodded, and the Ghurka said, "Got it." We all stepped toward the door.

There was a scuffling footstep outside and we froze. I pulled back the bolt on the Jap gun, clicked it forward again, and raised the muzzle.

The door opened and Lark Vallon stood there.

"Get inside and close that door!" I whispered.

SHE OBEYED. Her large, dark eyes were wide, and she was darting them back and forth trying to grasp what must have happened. Finally she spoke and her voice was still husky, but clipped and taut. "I came to help you escape—but I think Pung suspects. He's back in his cottage. I don't know whether he followed me or not—"

I said, "No talk. Let's go."

The Ghurka swayed for a minute, then growled. "Are we taking her—"

"Hell, yes," I said, "come on."

I went out first. I saw that the guard still lay where I had shot him, face down in the sloshy turf. The rain was coming down in



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a steadier, more constant way now, slanted toward north and no longer swirling in gusts. We started for the trees, and for the trail back to the dock. We were halfway there when we heard the shouting begin from the direction of Pung's camp. There was a sharp clanging as someone began to beat an alarm on a piece of iron.

Mike and the Ghurka, still numb, stumbled rather than ran—they set the agonizing pace. Behind us the shouting became closer and more agitated with every second. Once a white flare sizzled into the sky, then hung there, lighting everything with a sickening brightness, throwing shadows like plague spots from the mottled leaves on all our faces. A shot rang out—but several hundred yards away by the sound—either a signal or a mistake.

We came finally to the dock. I motioned the others on ahead to the airplane, and stood there at the edge of the trail to cover their retreat. Mama Fufu appeared in the open blister and beckoned them on. Now I heard distinctly the snapping of underbrush as the first of our pursuers came along the trail. I glanced quickly over my shoulder and saw that the Ghurka had reached the gangplank; Mike and Lark were a few yards behind.

A deafening blast of gunfire came suddenly from the trees. *WHANG! WHANG! WHANG!* The sounds hammered painfully at my ear drums. Slugs screamed in ricochet all around me. I dropped to one knee, aimed the Jap rifle at a muzzle flash and returned the shots. I fell flat then, rolled, scrambled up and fired once more.

For minutes after that I felt nothing but a terrifying confusion. I was anaesthetized by it—otherwise I would never have been able to live through that stretch of pure, stark fright. I made my way in spurts toward the airplane, running a few steps, dropping, rolling, then coming up on one knee again to fire a return shot. At some point during all this I heard the engines whirr, cough and sputter, then spring to life. I got to one edge of the gangplank. I stumbled, tripped—and one leg dropped into the water. There was a patter of footsteps and then hands

—skinny, birdlike hands—came down to lift me. I looked up and saw Mama Fufu's wrinkled face. "I'm—all right! Get back in!" I told her.

More shots came from the trees. This time I heard them strike the airplane. I pushed up the gangplank again and lurched forward. I literally fell through the hatch, and hit the floor. Someone brushed past me, but in the dark of the fuselage I couldn't tell who it was. The ship trembled with the surge of its engines and moved forward . . .

I got up and stumbled to the flight deck. The Ghurka and Mike were in the pilot's seats, and the ship was groaning away through the narrow inlet toward the sea. The sound of the engines overrode the noise of gunfire from the shore, but I could still hear an occasional bullet strike the plane.

I LOOKED ABOUT THE compartment. "Where's Lark? And the old lady?"

"Don't know—back in the waist, I guess," yelled Mike. There was a soft *click!* and a starred hole appeared in the thick plexiglas, inches from Mike's head. He didn't move; he kept staring at the instruments, waiting for the cylinder head temperature to rise.

I pushed rearward again. The waist was clear—nothing but the backs of empty chairs stared at me. "What the hell," I said softly. The starboard blister was still open. I went to it and looked out. The dock was not far behind us—shots rang from it, from the moving figures that suddenly covered it—and I ducked my head back in again. But in that moment I had glimpsed the limp, tiny figure in the peasant woman's garb lying very still at the edge of the water. I remembered then that Mama Fufu hadn't followed me into the airplane—

I remembered something else. I remembered that someone had brushed past me as I lay on the floor, and I realized that it could only have been Lark. She must have seen her mother go down, must have rushed to help. But I hadn't seen her on the dock. Now she had disappeared somewhere.

I TRIED to look out of the hatch again, and a volley of gunfire made me drop to cover once more. The fire wasn't accurate however; the driving rain made a grey curtain that was rapidly putting us out of sight of the dock. I rushed forward once more.

"Lark's still back there someplace!" I shouted to the Ghurka. "The old lady got hit—she went to help her—"

The striated rock face turned, and the quiet brown eyes looked into mine. "We're sunk if we turn back," the Ghurka said softly.

"I know. But—"

"Sorry, Jeff. It'd be the worst damn-fool thing we could do."

"Engines getting warm!" yelled Mike.

I gestured at him impatiently, as though to shut him up. "Look, Ghurka—you've got to—"

"Sorry, Jeff," he said again.

I knew that he was right, of course. We couldn't turn back and risk death for all of us just because of the girl. The Ghurka himself wouldn't have expected us to turn back if he had been left on the island. But I could go. Alone. There was nothing to stop me from diving overboard and swimming to the shore.

Nothing.

I didn't hear their shouts. I was out that blister hatch and slamming into that water before anybody'd had time to think. I ploughed down—and rose, with bubbles tingling about me, to the surface.

The instant my head broke out I gulped a load of air and ducked under again. But no slugs came chugging and foaming about me. Either Pung's boys hadn't seen me or they were concentrating all available fire on the Cat as she rode out through the inlet, blurring into the rain as she went. That would be smarter of them at that, I realized.

Cautiously I bobbed up again and breast-stroked myself to shore, submerged to the eyes. There, behind a boulder, I took stock of the situation.

The Cat was a ghost now, even the thunder of her engines muffled in that down-pour. The fire had slackened, too as if in recognition of its futility.

Mama Fufu still lay where she had

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fallen; I could just make out that limp huddle of clothing. But Lark was not by her side.

I glanced about me, puzzled. It seemed to me I heard her voice somewhere, high and shrill. Then I saw a flickering movement along the edge of the inlet. I looked again—it was Lark. She was standing there, rain-soaked and wind-whipped, her shirt torn from one shoulder, and she was waving.

Even as I watched, I heard the big Cat's thunder catch and throttle down to a mutter, saw the big wings turning. I choked with relief. Mike would try to pick her up—at least give her a chance.

Lark must have slipped away from the docks just before our pursuers had arrived, and then made her way through the trees, short-cutting the curve of the inlet. As I watched she paused just a moment to kick off her shoes and then dived into the water. She started toward the plane with swift, overhand strokes.

The thought came to me with a rush then. If I could just get out there to the point in time, I could follow Lark's bobbing head and steadily flailing arms—and be hauled aboard again myself.

I jumped up and sprinted into the bushes, praying nobody with a gun would spot me. But it was tough going in that brush and I did more lurching and stumbling than any real running forward . . .

It was no great surprise then when I heard the Cat's thunder beating up again. With Lark no doubt safely aboard, Mike and the Gurka were making good their getaway. Nor could I blame them.

But there I stood, panting and dirty and torn, on Pung's little island. I tried not to think what I was in for now. I could only look back toward Mama Fufu and hope I'd be lucky enough to get my ticket that quick.

Some of the greyness had cleared away and I could see to the opposite shore of the inlet. I caught a glimpse of white wings, a rudder, two pontoons—

Pung's Nakajima! I had forgotten that he moored it there. This was my escape, then!

I scrambled down to the shore, plunged in and swam toward it as hard as I could.

MY arms and shoulders ached, and my entire body felt like something hundreds of yards away from my head, attached only by a thin nerve. It was the peculiar, exhausted self-unreality that comes sometimes in bed between sleeping and waking. Meanwhile to add to the dreamlike quality of it all, the storm had begun to break and the sunlight was filtering through the clouds in a soft, shadowless wash. The smell of the wet palms, and their harsh dripping was in the air.

I reached one float of the Nakajima, pulled myself on to it, and lay there with my chest heaving.

I don't know how long I stayed there. I knew that I ought to get going as quickly as possible, that maybe my life depended on it, but I couldn't. That's how exhausted I was. I was like the man on the life raft who knows he shouldn't drink seawater, but can't resist it. I do know that when I finally made myself open my eyes, when I finally stirred again the grey light had gone away and the sun was already making torn shreds of the storm clouds. Far to the northeast I could see the storm itself, covering a quarter of the sky.

I stood up on the float. I looked up the inlet, then, cocked my head and heard very faint voices—there were still men at the dock, but they were around the bend and out of sight. I looked seaward and didn't see the junk; it had probably headed for shore or disappeared around the point of the island. I shook myself, then, and got to work.

Taking the tarp from the engine was a difficult, clumsy job; I had to balance myself on the leading edge of the wing, which was marked with a Japanese or Chinese ideograph which probably meant: NO STEP. It slid away finally after I had broken three fingernails and nearly fallen into the water twice. I slipped down to the pontoon again, ran to the shore and cast off the mooring line whose end loop had been made, with very bad seamanship, into a slip knot and simply thrown over a staked bamboo log.

With equally bad seamanship I removed the loop and tossed it to the dock. Then I jumped to the pontoon again, climbed the

wing and legged it into the cockpit. There I made a quick check. Except for the fact that the throttle was on the right hand sight it all looked very standard. The instruments were marked with Japanese characters, except for the altimeter which was of American make.

I wobbled her twice, switched the carburetor heat on and pressed the starter. She whirled somewhere deep in her bowels, belched a single tongue of flame and a few plumes of oily smoke, then her propeller rocked and she started. I made one more quick check—mixture rich—increase pitch—and then put my hand on the throttle to jam it forward.

There was the sound of a shot and the curved, open-cockpit windshield before me suddenly developed a hole with jagged lines running from it in all directions. I whirled my head. Pung was on the shore, Monty Pung, himself, and I saw him immediately. He was rushing from the trees on to the dock and he had a black, heavy Mauser in his hand. I looked for only a tenth of a second—less, perhaps—but that tableau burnt itself into my brain so that I would never forget it. Rail-thin, high cheekboned Montgomery Pung looked ridiculously neat and well-groomed in his white suit. It was spotless. He had removed his pith helmet and his shiny black hair was combed to perfection. His small white teeth gleamed as he opened his mouth and shouted something I didn't understand. He kept running and raised the pistol to fire it again. In another moment, I knew, he would be at the edge of the dock, and wouldn't hesitate to leap to the pontoon.

I ducked my head deep into the cockpit and shoved the throttle forward.

The Nakajima moved slowly at first, slowly and painfully. I suppose it was only a fraction of a second that she trembled and inched away like that, but it seemed hours to me. Then suddenly she was gathering speed, and her engine was roaring with plenty of power, and with the characteristic ragged timing of a Jap plane. Only when I felt a definite push from the back of the seat did I dare lift my head above the cockpit level again. I glanced back quickly, then. The dock was empty. I didn't bother with a second look.

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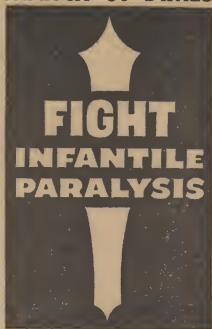


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I felt the ship gather definite speed, saw the spray begin to fly, and headed her hard for the open sea.

Moments later she gave a slight upward bump as the pontoon step-backs let go, and then she was skimming easily over the water. I waited until I could really feel the bite of the controls. Then I eased the stick back almost imperceptibly, leveled her, and let her take herself into the air.

ALMOST immediately I sensed a slight buck and drag. I let the stick slip a fraction of an inch forward again. A colt of panic cantered through me. Had I done something wrong? Left something out? Had I trimmed her incorrectly? She seemed to take hold and climb again then, and I supposed that the Nakajima needed even more take-off speed than I had allowed. I made it a long shallow climb and let the lift of the wings do most of the work.

The altimeter showed fifteen hundred before I leaned back and relaxed. I changed the pitch then and rolled the trim

forward a degree or two. I still didn't like the feel of her—there was a definite drag somewhere, but I surmised that to be a possible characteristic of Jap airplanes.

I rolled into a bank for one last look at the island that had very nearly become my permanent resting place. That was when I saw the bulky object dangling far below the plane. My eyebrows made an interceptor climb. My jaw dropped—far—almost to my chest. "No!" I said in soft horror.

Montgomery Pung was hanging by a looped ankle, swaying head down at the end of the twenty foot mooring rope!

I shuddered. And in that instant he dropped. Whether the line parted, the loop slipped, or his shoe came off, I don't know. But as I watched his thrashing body fell away, down toward the sea. I imagined I heard his fading scream even above the snarl of the float-plane's engine.

I made one circle of the spot where the momentary splash had appeared. Then I wagged my wings—a kind of burial honor, even for a heel like Pung, I guess—and found a course toward Canton and the coast.

The horizon held steady across the cowling, the engine roared in good health and the slipstream whistled past the open cockpit. The airplane flew smoothly, now. And so did I. I flew instinctively and automatically once more—and that left my mind free to think about the Ghurka, who would listen to reason, I was sure, and try me out as a pilot on the Manila run. Not a first pilot, of course, since I would need Mike Giannini in the left hand seat to show me the ropes for a while. But even on a co-pilot's pay I could start thinking about a little place just outside of Shanghai, with a cook and a houseboy at first so Lark and I wouldn't have to get too domesticated all at once. It was a nice dream.

I leaned back, closed my eyes and stopped being sorry for myself.

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